

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335 - c. 394), *Not Three Gods and Address on Religious Instruction*

In truth, the question you propound to us is no small one, nor such that but small harm will follow if it meets with insufficient treatment. For by the force of the question, we are at first sight compelled to accept one or other of two erroneous opinions, and either to say “there are three Gods,” which is unlawful, or not to acknowledge the Godhead of the Son and the Holy Spirit, which is impious and absurd.

The question is, as I said, very difficult to deal with: yet, if we should be able to find anything that may give support to the uncertainty of our mind, so that it may no longer totter and waver in this monstrous dilemma, it would be well: on the other hand, even if our reasoning be found unequal to the problem, we must keep forever, firm and unmoved, the tradition which we received by succession from the fathers, and seek from the Lord the reason which is the advocate of our faith: and if this be found by any of those endowed with grace, we must give thanks to Him who bestowed the grace; but if not, we shall none the less, on those points which have been determined, hold our faith unchangeably.

God’s nature cannot be named and is ineffable. . . . Since, then, as we perceive the varied operations of the power above us, we fashion our appellations from the several operations that are known to us. . . . Thus, since among men the action of each in the same pursuits is discriminated, they are properly called many, since each of them is separated from the others within his own environment, according to the special character of his operation. But in the case of the Divine nature we do not similarly learn that the Father does anything by Himself in which the Son does not work conjointly, or again that the Son has any special operation apart from the Holy Spirit; but every operation which extends from God to the Creation, and is named according to our variable conceptions of it, has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit. For this reason, the name derived from the operation is not divided with regard to the number of those who fulfil it, because the action of each concerning anything is not separate and peculiar, but whatever comes to pass, in reference either to the acts of His providence for us, or to the government and constitution of the universe, comes to pass by the action of the Three, yet what does come to pass is not three things.

Yet although we set forth Three Persons and three names, we do not consider that we have had bestowed upon us three lives, one from each Person separately; but the same life is wrought in us by the Father, and prepared by the Son, and depends on the will of the Holy Spirit.

The Father is God: the Son is God: and yet by the same proclamation God is One, because no difference either of nature or of operation is contemplated in the Godhead.

For since it is said “the angels do always behold the Face of My Father which is in heaven,” and it is not possible to behold the person of the Father otherwise than by fixing the sight upon it through His image; and the image of the person of the Father is the Only-begotten, and to Him again no man can draw near whose mind has not been illumined by the Holy Spirit, what else is shown from this but that the Holy Spirit is not separated from any operation which is wrought by the Father and the Son? Thus, the identity of operation in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit shows plainly the undistinguishable character of their substance.

But since our system of religion is wont to observe a distinction of persons in the unity of the Nature, to prevent our argument in our contention with Greeks sinking to the level of Judaism there is need again of a distinct technical statement in order to correct all error on this point.

For not even by those who are external to our doctrine is the Deity held to be without Logos. Now this admission of theirs will quite enable our argument to be unfolded. For he who admits that God is not without Logos, will agree that a being who is not without Logos (or word) certainly possesses Logos. Now it is to be observed that the utterance of man is expressed by the same term. If, then, he should say that he understands what the Logos of God is according to the analogy of things with us, he will thus be led on to a loftier idea, it being an absolute necessity for him to believe that the utterance, just as everything else, corresponds with the nature. But in that transcendent nature, through the greatness of the subject contemplated, everything that is said about it is elevated with it. Therefore, though mention be made of God's Word it will not be thought of as having its realization in the utterance of what is spoken, and as then vanishing away, like our speech, into the nonexistent. On the contrary, as our nature, liable as it is to come to an end, is endued with speech which likewise comes to an end, so that, imperishable and ever-existing nature has eternal, and substantial speech. If, then, logic requires him to admit this eternal subsistence of God's Word, it is altogether necessary to admit also that the subsistence of that word consists in a living state.

If, then, the Logos, as being life, lives, it certainly has the faculty of will, for no one of living creatures is without such a faculty. Moreover, that such a will has also capacity to act must be the conclusion of a devout mind. For if you admit not this potency, you prove the reverse to exist. But no; impotence is quite removed from our conception of Deity.

As, then, by the higher mystical ascent from matters that concern ourselves to that transcendent nature we gain a knowledge of the Word, by the same method we shall be led on to a conception of the Spirit, by observing in our own nature certain shadows and resemblances of His ineffable power. When we think of God's Word we do not deem the Word to be something unsubstantial, but to be essentially self-subsisting, with a faculty of will ever-working, all-powerful. The like doctrine have we received as to God's Spirit; we regard it as that which goes with the Word and manifests its energy, But we conceive of it as an essential power, regarded as self-centered in its own proper person, yet equally incapable of being separated from God in Whom it is, or from the Word of God whom it accompanies, as from melting into nothingness; but as being, after the likeness of God's Word, existing as a person, able to will, self-moved, efficient, ever choosing the good, and for its every purpose having its power concurrent with its will.

And so, one who severely studies the depths of the mystery, receives secretly in his spirit, indeed, a moderate amount of apprehension of the doctrine of God's nature, yet he is unable to explain clearly in words the ineffable depth of this mystery. As, for instance, how the same thing is capable of being numbered and yet rejects numeration, how it is observed with distinctions yet is apprehended as a unity, how it is separate as to person yet is not divided as to underlying essence. For, in person, the Spirit is one thing and the Word another, and yet again that from which the Word and Spirit is, another. But when you have gained the conception of what the distinction is in these, the oneness, again, of the nature admits not division, so that the supremacy of the divine monarchy is not split and cut up into differing divinities.