

The Cappadocian Fathers:

A Study in Pastoral Practice

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Introduction

Pastoral identity is a struggle that the church has encountered throughout the ages. One of the struggles a pastor may find himself in today is how to minister at a time when the church is recovering from a pandemic or society seems to be shifting against the idea of being part of the Christian church. How can a pastor deal with such issues today and find ways to connect to people to spread God's kingdom?

Though the Reformed branch of Christianity has many powerful men of God who are examples of being great pastors- men like John Calvin and some of the Puritans immediately come to mind- there are other orthodox fields to plow in the early church that give us good instruction and can be examples for the church today. To help gain fresh focus on pastoral identity, "scholars have called for a return to traditional sources to find possible solutions including the Early Fathers..."¹ to build pastoral skills for ministry application.

A group of the Church Fathers worth investigating is the Cappadocian Fathers. As a pastor investigates his own identity as a minister, he will see that the Cappadocian Fathers can help in the fields of the office of pastoral ministry, theological scholarship, and Christian living.

The Cappadocians as Pastor

One of the Cappadocian Fathers' attributes worth considering is their high view of the office of pastor. When looking at the position of Gregory of Nazianzus, for instance, we see that he felt called to the most important work a man can be called to. An insight into the mindset of his calling

¹ Clare McGrath-Merkle, "Gregory the Great's Metaphor of the Physician of the Heart as a Model for Pastoral Identity", *Journal of Religion and Health* Vol. 50, No.2 (June 2011), 374.

was best expressed as “the guiding of man, the most variable and manifold of creatures, seems to me in very deed to be the art of arts and science of sciences.”²

Gregory understood that shepherding the flock of God is the most important and weighty of callings. The Cappadocian pastoral mindset reveals how lofty and influential the pastoral office is, and how seriously it should be taken by those who have been called to the pastorate. When confronted with Gregory’s words, it should lead a man to desire to minister to the flock in a way that would honor God and meet those high standards. The only example that a pastor has of one who fills that high view of the office perfectly is Jesus Himself. So how does the Cappadocian Father attempt to minister like Jesus?

The Cappadocians understood that one of the ways to practice the pastoral office like Jesus was to take on the complete shepherding of man, caring for both body and soul. They understood Jesus’ explanation that those who love God care for the physical needs of those around them as taught in The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). They understood that Jesus himself was a healer and taught that the physical care of man was part of loving one another. The Cappadocians looked to the medical sciences to be a way of representing this part of Christ’s ministry. The sentiment, “all you who study medicine have, one may say, humanity for your profession”³ reveals that medicine is perhaps the best picture on earth of caring for another person in the Cappadocian mind.

Thinking medicine was a way to show mercy may be what sparked an interest in the education and writing of the Cappadocians. For example, one historian writes, “Basil took an interest in the

² Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 2, *In Defence of His Flight to Pontus, and His Return, After His Ordination to the Priesthood, with an Exposition of the Character of the Priestly Office*. <https://newadvent.org/fathers/310202.htm>.

³ Gregory of Nyssa, ed. Philip Schaff, *Dogmatic Treatises* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1982), 449.

sick and infirm. When he was a student at Athens, he had shown particular attentiveness in the study of medicine, not only in its practical side, but also in its theory and principles”.⁴ This study of medicine would lead to the application of it in their ministry. To the Cappadocian Father. to practice mercy ministry was a way of pastoring in Jesus’ image.

Basil the Great expressed this attitude on an occasion for pastoral care when he wrote in his *Letter to Olympius*, “I am very glad that you have begun a course of medicine, and pray that you may be benefitted by it. A condition of body fit for painless activity would well become so pious a soul.”⁵ Basil hopes the medicine works and restores Olympius to full activity just as Jesus restored the centurion’s child in The Gospel of John 4:46-54. This expression of gladness in the physical restoration of Olympius reveals the pastoral mercy Basil had toward Olympius.

There were even greater examples of care for those who were in physical need. Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil the Great worked with those who suffered from bodily diseases that made them outcasts in society and gave them great physical pain. As leprosy was still having a great effect on people during the Patristic Period, Basil took lepers who in that day were “driven from their homes, from the market, from the fountains, from all public meeting places, from cities and from highways, until Basil took them under his care, lepers were entirely at the mercy of charitable individuals”.⁶ Basil understood that caring for the physical needs of people was part of his work and ministry and made efforts to be on the journey with people while they were in need.

⁴ Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 158.

⁵ Basil the Great, “Letter to Olympius,” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series II Vol. 8* (Grand Rapids: Christian classics ethereal Library, 2010), 366.

⁶ Mary Emily Keenan, “St. Gregory of Nazianzus and Early Byzantine Medicine,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, Vol 9 No1 (January 1941): 18.

We see this part of their ministry driven further in their interest of medicine. Giving medical aid is a way to show people that you care for them, and it was used as an analogy by the Cappadocians as it was “the medical art that the Fathers turned in defending and clarifying Christian teachings”.⁷ Basil describes Scripture in this way. In his letter titled To A fallen Virgin, he says that “you might indeed find many remedies for evil in Scripture, many medicines to save from destruction and lead to health ... [and] let us not use these remedies for ill; by these means let us heal our soul”.⁸ Seeing the connection between descriptions of healing the body, as pastors, they would also need to care for the soul.

Though there is an obvious interest in caring for the body, the Cappadocians would also express their care for the soul as they understood that their job was to care for the whole person. Though they appreciated the physician's work, they knew the pastor's work also to minister to the soul. Gregory of Nazianzus expressed this when he said, “Anyone may recognize this, by comparing the work of the physician of souls with the treatment of the body; and noticing that, laborious as the latter is, ours is more laborious, and of more consequence, from the nature of its subject matter, the power of its science, and the object of its exercise.”⁹ To care for the body is important to the Cappadocians, but there is greater weight in healing the soul. One scholar would say that Gregory

⁷ Mary Emily Keenan, “St. Gregory of Nazianzus and Early Byzantine Medicine,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, Vol 9 No1 (January 1941):8.

⁸Basil of Caesarea, ed. Schaff, Phillip. Basil Select Letters and Works Letter to a Fallen Virgin, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Vol. VIII: (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 183.

⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *In Defence of His Flight to Pontus, and His Return, After His Ordination to the Priesthood, with an Exposition of the Character of the Priestly Office*

of Nazianzus felt that “the burden of the “salvation of the soul is upon the pastor”.¹⁰ This leads to the next part of the Cappadocian ministry.

The second way the Cappadocian Fathers ministered in the image of Jesus was a concern for man's spiritual health. When Basil was writing to Count Terentius who lived a life of dealing with high-stress public situations, he said, “I was straightway distressed (the truth must be told) at the thought of how contrary to your mind it must be that you after once giving up the anxieties of official life, and allowing for the leisure care for your soul, should again be forced back into your old career”.¹¹ Here, we see not only the care for Terentius’ mental health but also his spiritual health. Basil was concerned for Terentius as he was aware that such a lifestyle could be strenuous in his devotional life.

There was an understanding that the health of the soul was also based on God’s work for the sinner. As they ministered to others about their spiritual well-being, they knew that Jesus was a great physician. They saw that God’s gift, as Gregory of Nyssa wrote, “the medicine of repentance... [which] seem[s] to come from God”.¹² The soul needs something from outside of itself and that was God bringing it to health through God’s remedy of salvation.

As the Cappadocians encouraged those in their care to take care of their soul, they were sure to keep themselves in check. As Gregory of Nazianzus would say, “to undertake the training of others

¹⁰ Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 19.

¹¹ Basil of Caesarea, ed. Schaff, Phillip. Basil Select Letters and Works Letter to Olympius, *A Select Library of The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Vol. VIII: (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 716.

¹² Gregory of Nyssa, *Dogmatic Treatises*, 405.

before being sufficiently trained oneself, and to learn, as men say, the potter's art on a wine-jar, that is, to practice ourselves in piety at the expense of others' souls ".¹³

This practice reveals that the devotional life of a pastor was part of their own soul-care in the Cappadocian mind. If the pastor were to shepherd a people to the Savior, they themselves would need to know the way. This knowledge is displayed as a point of serious contemplation in the Cappadocian Fathers as Gregory of Nazianzus wrote:

For these reasons I allege that our office as physicians far exceeds in toilsomeness, and consequently in worth, that which is confined to the body; and further, because the latter is mainly concerned with the surface, and only in a slight degree investigates the causes which are deeply hidden. But the whole of our treatment and exertion is concerned with the hidden man of the heart, 1 Peter 3:4 and our warfare is directed against that adversary and foe within us, who uses ourselves as his weapons against ourselves, and, most fearful of all, hands us over to the death of sin. 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, and, as I am persuaded, of no slight countermanoeuvring on our own part, which must manifest itself both in word and deed, if ourselves, the most precious possession we have, are to be duly tended and cleansed and made as deserving as possible.¹⁴

This devotional life would lead a Puritan to recognize the desire of the Cappadocians to minister to their own soul. Thomas Brooks tells of something he once read of a Cappadocian practice of how they would keep themselves in check to lead others to God. He wrote, "I have read of one [Gregory of Nazianzus], who when anything fell out prosperously, would read over the Lamentations of Jerimiah, and help keep his heart tender, humbled, and low."¹⁵

¹³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *In Defence of His Flight to Pontus, and His Return, After His Ordination to the Priesthood, with an Exposition of the Character of the Priestly Office*.

¹⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *In Defence of His Flight to Pontus, and His Return, After His Ordination to the Priesthood, with an Exposition of the Character of the Priestly Office*.

¹⁵ Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices*, (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2021), 78.

As the Cappadocian Fathers' pastoral ministry is examined, the need to minister to the body and soul can be applied today. Not only can the pastor minister to the soul by preaching and teaching, but he can also show that he cares for the person by ministering to the physical person. He can have the elders and deacons set aside a part of the benevolence fund to ensure that those who need help with medication can get assistance from the church. This action can also give a path to minister to those in need of medical assistance to point to Christ as the great physician and to thank Him for the merciful profession of medicine that He has given to man.

As the Cappadocians wanted to pastor in Jesus' image by caring for the body and soul, they wanted to make sure that the soul's medicine being fed to man was of an orthodox quality. This would lead them to make sure that the theology they were teaching was God's truth, and call attention to the heterodox teachings of others.

The Cappadocians as Creedal Theologians

Unfortunately, the Cappadocian Fathers' work reveals that they were not centered on all facets of theology. As Louis Berkhof states, "Gregory of Nazianzus repudiates with scorn and indignation the idea of ransom paid to Satan, but he also rejects the idea that God the Father required a ransom."¹⁶ However, if we ignore the Cappadocians because of statements like this, we miss their contributions to the church. We will make the mistake others have made, which was "at times, disdainful treatment of which their works have received at the hands of certain historians."¹⁷

¹⁶ Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 167.

¹⁷ Keenan, "St. Gregory of Nazianzus and Early Byzantine Medicine", 8.

An important aspect of the Cappadocians in their scholarship is that they didn't act in a vacuum in their work. Even though the church was still young, the Cappadocians interacted with other theologians of their time as well as those who preceded them. Today's pastor can use the Cappadocian Fathers interactions with other theologians to give insight into their own studies and interactions with the church and the world abroad.

The position of the Cappadocian Fathers could be argued as they were creedal theologians. That is, they sided with the already established creeds of their day and used those councils as a basis for their own theology. One historian puts them in the creedal tradition by stating, "Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa [are] the champions of the Nicene faith in the generation that succeeded Athanasius".¹⁸

The fidelity to the Nicene creed was displayed in their statements about the relationship between the Father and the Son. Gregory of Nazianzus defended Athanasius and the orthodox position with clarity as he stated, "there never was a time when the Father was without the Word; there was never a time when He was not the Father; there was never a time He was without the truth, or without wisdom, or without power, or denied of life, or splendor, or of goodness."¹⁹

The work of the Cappadocians, as Nicene theologians, was to carry the work that Athanasius had begun on the ontology of the Godhead and use it to logically apply to the three persons. Their work is where we get a "formulation of the position that clearly distinguished between the ousia and hypostasis and that in God there is only one ousia, in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

¹⁸ Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 119.

¹⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, trans. Stephen Reynolds, *Five Theological Orations*, <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/36303/1/GregoryofNazianzusTheologicalOrations.pdf>.16.

share, but that there are three hypostases, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, was largely the work of what are often called the three great Cappadocians”.²⁰

This work was much needed at the time as there was a question about the persons of the Godhead and how each person was indeed God, especially in the person of the Holy Spirit. Here, the Cappadocians wanted to argue for truth and carry out the Nicene orthodoxy and how the ontological formulation applies to Him. It is in this work that “the Cappadocians carried this argument, strengthened it, and laid the basis for extending the term *homousius* to the Holy Spirit-He too was “of the same essence” of the Father.”²¹

One of the Cappadocian’s contributions is their work defending the Christian Faith because of their apologetic efforts for God’s Truth. Their work left us with many accounts of their debates and the results of their scholarship. Their views and beliefs can be seen as the center of their scholarship as these brothers in Christ held the Bible as their authority. They argued that “So long as the word of Truth is on our side, never be any wise distressed at the calamity of a lie.”²²

The Cappadocian scholarship was a result of working during a time when the church was being attacked from both outside and inside the church. For instance, Gregory of Nazianzus was “born in the very year of that Constantine moved his capitol to Byzantium, as a student in Athens the

²⁰ Kenneth Scott LaTourette, *A History of Christianity*, (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers,1953),161-2.

²¹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power: The Age of the early Church Fathers*, Vol. 1 (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus Publications,2016), 239.

²² Basil of Caesarea, *Basil Select Letters and Works Letter to Olympius*, 398.

contemporary of Julian, later the Apostate, rising continuously to the various challenges of various Arian confessions that tried to subvert Nicene orthodoxy.”²³

Because of this atmosphere in which they were born, the Cappadocians would encounter statements that would speak against the deity of Christ which they must counter to continue to establish God’s truth in the church. Arius wrote to Alexander of Alexandria a statement that would contain their view on Jesus’ nature; “as we say, at the will of God, created before times and ages, and gaining life from being from the Father, who gave substance to his glories together with him”.²⁴

The Cappadocians would rightfully counter a statement like this and reveal how the Arians had not listened to the very source which orthodox doctrine is gleaned from. Though these interactions were often polemical with the theologians they were debating with, they didn’t just throw words out without conscience or purpose. Gregory of Nazianzus gives us an example of this when he said, “By the power of the Spirit we have broken the twistings and turnings of our opponent’s arguments, and have dispersed the cluster of difficulties and objections which were ripped from the Holy Scriptures by those who profane the Bible and pervert the sense of its text in order to win the mob to their side and confuse the way of truth.”²⁵

The Cappadocians felt compelled to do this work as part of their ministry. “If I were not to make as strenuous efforts on behalf of the churches as the opponents of sound doctrine make a

²³ Nancy Guthrie, “Book Review: Brian E. Daley, S.J.. *Gregory of Nazianzus*,” *Novum Testamentum* 49 (2007): 305.

²⁴ Arius, *Letter to Alexander of Alexandria*, https://earlychurchtexts.com/public/arius_letter_to_alexander_of_alexandria.htm

²⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Five Theological Orations*, 71.

subvert and utterly destroy them, you may be quite sure that there is nothing to ground truth from being swept away and destroyed by its enemies”.²⁶ As creedal theologians, they were the line of defense in the church against the heresies that tempted the flock.

This is an example of how the pastor can keep theological truth in the mouths and minds of his flock. As he hears things that are either questionable or certainly not orthodox, he can point back to the language of a creed, or confession like The Westminster Confession of Faith, to help defend the truth or direct the flock to the Truth of God’s Word. As the pastor prepares a sermon or lesson, he can use the confession to help his own language be detailed and sharp, so that his words are orthodox and honor God. The pastor, as a creedal theologian, can practice theology in the way the Cappadocian fathers did and be a defender of Biblical truth in his own day and time.

The Cappadocians were concerned with their belief system and worked to preserve the truth of God in their minds and hearts by being faithful to God’s doctrine as presented in the Nicene Creed. However, they understood that Christianity is not just a religion of the mind, but that one must live in a way that honors God. It is here that the pastor can begin to examine his life according to Christian living in the way of the Cappadocians.

The Cappadocians and Christian Living

One of the criticisms of pastors today is that some, in the public eye, seem to be money hungry. Whether these pastors represent true Christianity is a debate for another time, but there have been incidences where pastors have asked their church to pay for expensive items to supply his lavish

²⁶ Basil of Caesarea, *Select Letters and Works Letter to Olympius*, 483.

lifestyles.²⁷ Though there isn't anything wrong with pastors having nice things, the fact that a person can become greedy should give a pastor an occasional moment of self-reflection and make sure that he is living in a way that honors God.

One of the ways a pastor can examine their life is from the interest that the Cappadocian Fathers had in monasticism. In particular, the ascetic life as part of that movement. This lifestyle came into consideration "during the student days at Athens [when Basil of Caesarea] and Gregory of Nazianzus agreed to join the ascetic life"²⁸. The basic principle behind this was trying to live in a place of self-denial. However, the monastic lifestyle is really the extreme opposite of the greedy life and therefore must be avoided because this has its own set of dangers as well. However, it can give pastors a point of reflection about their lives, in particular stewardship.

Though the Cappadocians could cause the right reflection in pastors to question their own lives, an outside source is needed to rightly access a balance between over-lavishness and asceticism. It is important to point out the problems with the monastic lifestyle. John Calvin warns of the dangers of monasticism when he said the monks "hawk themselves among the common people, when they would lay a snare for untutored or ignorant youths, [and] such admiration of monasticism remains among the people that they think the monastic life alone angelic, perfect, and purged of all fault."²⁹ Calvin warns us of danger within the practice of monasticism as there were ignorance and ungodly displays that were often associated with it.

²⁷ Michael Brice- Sadler, "A wealthy televangelist explains his fleet of private jets: 'It's a biblical thing'", <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/06/04/wealthy-televangelist-explains-his-fleet-private-jets-its-biblical-thing/>

²⁸ Kenneth Scott LaTourette, *A History of Christianity*, (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1953), 228.

²⁹ John Calvin, ed. by John T. McNeil, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol.2, Book 4, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1265.

One of the ways that we can try and reason these two extremes of monasticism and unnecessary lavishness is a healthy Christian form of self-denial. We can turn again to Calvin to set a guide for finding that median as he says “we are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore sway our plans or deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours.”³⁰ Here, Calvin reminds us that Christian self-denial is that our heart desires the things of God and from that, we can make decisions on a life that honors Him, which would keep us from greed and works-based puffed-up self-righteousness.

One thing we can safely glean from the Cappadocians is that they did not think Christian living to be an easy or casual decision. As they spoke to those who were either thinking about becoming or are Christians, they wouldn’t misrepresent the seriousness of the matter. Basil the Great summed this up as “for it is no light thing for one, who makes a profession, to follow up all that the promise entails”.³¹

As pastors, it is important to lead someone into the Christian life, but also be truthful about the seriousness of it. When making a covenant promise of faith, we must remember that, as Calvin stated earlier, we are not our own and that we live in the way God desires us to. Christianity, to a Cappadocian Father, was more than a name, but a promised way of life.

Their counsel for Christians and living in a God-honoring way was to be aware of where they were worshipping at the time. As the Cappadocian Fathers were battling different heresies, like Arianism, they would counsel true Believers on how to deal with false teachers in the church; “But

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 690.

³¹ Basil of Caesarea, *Select Letters and Works Letter to Olympius*, 634.

all who maintain that either the Son or Spirit is a creature, or absolutely reduce the Spirit to ministerial and servile rank, are far removed from the truth. Flee their communion. Turn away from their teaching. They are destructive to souls.”³² It was important that true believers belonged to true churches that rightly divided the Word of God.

The Cappadocians believed it was part of the Christian’s holy living to be part of a church body. Their encouragement was “that those for whom such treatment is beneficial, should be subject to pastoral care and rule, and be guided by word and deed in the path of duty; while others should be pastors and teachers”³³.

This belief is where we see the care for the things of God be displayed in the hearts of the Cappadocians. Knowing that God does not forgive the false teachings of the teacher, they themselves seem to hold tighter to what they understood to be good doctrine and therefore felt the desire to feed the flock rightly and be an aid to their holy living. In referencing Hebrews 10:38-39 it says, “but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those which have faith and preserve their souls” (Hebrews 10:38-39 [ESV], Gregory of Nazianzus was led to say “in present circumstances I am bolder to declare the truth, lest by shrinking back (as it is written) I should be condemned as displeasing to God”.³⁴

³² Basil of Caesarea, *Select Letters and Works Letter to Olympius*, 542.

³³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *In Defence of His Flight to Pontus, and His Return, After His Ordination to the Priesthood, with an Exposition of the Character of the Priestly Office*.

³⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Five Theological Orations*, 45.

Conclusion

Though the Cappadocian Fathers had their struggles and errors with each of the fields examined, there are plenty of good things that we can glean from them. In the field of pastoral care, we see that they cared about the souls of those who were under their care. They encouraged a devotional life and wanted them to have a relationship with God. They also cared for the physical being of man, taking care of the individual personally, and being an example to the church today as possible ways to minister to the ill. They connected a high view of the office with a servant's heart.

The Cappadocian Fathers did not shy away from the theological issues of their day and turned to the creeds of their time to defend the Truth of God's Word. They built upon this truth and used the creed to teach who God truly is to the church and heretics alike. The Cappadocians were creedal theologians and gave pastors ways to use the creeds in their ministry today.

The Cappadocians challenge us with Christian living and what it means to practice Christian self-denial against the temptations of looking successful before men. Even their being attracted to a life of asceticism challenges today's pastors with decisions in their self-denial in a Christian way before God.

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https://earlychurchtexts.com/public/arius_letter_to_alexander_of_alexandria.htm.
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