

Gregory of Nyssa and the Culture of Oppression

By Robert Kruschwitz

In the late fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa spoke out against the institution of slavery in a way that none had before, vilifying it as incompatible with Christianity. What can we learn from this Cappadocian Father about seeing beyond the veil of oppression?

Meditation

Each person is not just to be respected but to be revered as one created in God's image. To treat a child of God as if he or she was less than this is not just wrong, which it is; it is not just evil, as it often is; not just painful, as it often must be for the victim; it is veritably blasphemous, for it is to spit in the face of God.

- Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Reflection

The true offense of slavery, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-394 AD) argued in his fourth homily on the book of Ecclesiastes, is that God created humans to be free. Commenting on the Teacher's proud claim "I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house" (Ecclesiastes 2:7), Gregory wrote:

If man is in the likeness of God, and rules the whole earth, and has been granted authority over everything on earth from God, who is his buyer, tell me? Who is his seller? To God alone belongs this power; or rather, not even to God himself. For his gracious gifts, it says, are irrevocable (Romans 11:29). God would not therefore reduce the human race to slavery, since he himself, when we had been enslaved to sin, spontaneously recalled us to freedom. But if God does not enslave what is free, who is he that sets his own power above God's?

Kimberly Flint-Hamilton emphasizes how extraordinary Gregory's view was in late antiquity. "Even though Gregory was not alone in his compassion for the lot of the slaves, his conclusion to attack the very institution was unique," she notes. "Before Gregory, slave owners had been urged to treat their slaves with dignity and not abuse them. They had even been urged to manumit (set free) those servants that had proven themselves worthy. Yet only Gregory suggested that slavery, as an institution, was sinful."

Gregory interpreted Scripture intertextually, allowing key passages to shape his understanding of other passages. Here he views Ecclesiastes through the lens of the imago Dei (the image of God). While his contemporaries agreed that God created human beings equal, they usually viewed slavery as a "sinful distinction"—an aspect of our fallen condition that we must accept. Gregory, however, taught that every human being—past, present, and future—is part of God's grand design in creation. He understood Genesis 1:26-27 to be about not just the first humans, but "the fullness of humankind, comprehended by God's 'foresight,'" David Bentley Hart writes. "Adam and Eve, however superlatively endowed with the gifts of grace at their origin, constitute in Gregory's eyes only the first increments (so to speak) of that concrete community that, as a whole, reflects the beauty of its creator." Gregory names this fullness of humankind,

which contains people of all eras, the pleroma. The beauty of the pleroma is marred by enslaving one portion of humanity to another.

Flint-Hamilton sums up Gregory's view: "Only in universal freedom can the fullness of pleroma unfold, with each individual human being contributing. Slavery, racism, and oppression in general, are completely incompatible with the will of God."