On ”Not Three Gods”

Gregory of Nyssa (c. AD 335–395)

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To Ablabius

Ye that are strong with all might in the inner man ought by rights to carry on the struggle against the enemies of the truth, and not to shrink from the task, that we fathers may be gladdened by the noble toil of our sons; for this is the prompting of the law of nature: but as you turn your ranks, and send against us the assaults of those darts which are hurled by the opponents of the truth, and demand that their ”hot burning coals” and their shafts sharpened by knowledge falsely so called should be quenched with the shield of faith by us old men, we accept your command, and make ourselves an example of obedience , in order that you may yourself give us the just requital on like commands, Ablabius, noble soldier of Christ, if we should ever summon you to such a contest. 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 argument which you state is something like this:-Peter, James, and John, being in one human nature, are called three men: and there is no absurdity in describing those who are united in nature, if they are more than one, by the plural number of the name derived from their nature. If, then, in the above case, custom admits this, and no one forbids us to speak of those who are two as two, or those who are more than two as three, how is it that in the case of our statements of the mysteries of the Faith, though confessing the Three Persons, and acknowledging no difference of nature between them, we are in some sense at variance with our confession, when we say that the Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is one, and yet forbid men to say ”there are three Gods”? 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 for ever, 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.

What, then, is the reason that when we count one by one those who are exhibited to us in one nature, we ordinarily name them in the plural and speak of "so many men," instead of calling them all one: while in the case of the Divine nature our doctrinal definition rejects the plurality of Gods, at once enumerating the Persons, and at the same time not admitting the plural signification? Perhaps one might seem to touch the point if he were to say (speaking offhand to straightforward people), that the definition refused to reckon Gods in any number to avoid any resemblance to the polytheism of the heathen, lest, if we too were to enumerate the Deity, not in the singular, but in the plural, as they are accustomed to do, there might be supposed to be also some community of doctrine. This answer, I say, if made to people of a more guileless spirit, might seem to be of some weight: but in the case of the others who require that one of the alternatives they propose should be established (either that we should not acknowledge the Godhead in Three Persons, or that, if we do, we should speak of those who share in the same Godhead as three), this answer is not such as to furnish any solution of the difficulty. And hence we must needs make our reply at greater length, tracing out the truth as best we may; for the question is no ordinary one.

We say, then, to begin with, that the practice of calling those who are not divided in nature by the very name of their common nature in the plural, and saying they are "many men," is a customary abuse of language, and that it would be much the same thing to say they are "many human natures. And the truth of this we may see from the following instance. When we address any one, we do not call him by the name of his nature, in order that no confusion may result from the community of the name, as would happen if every one of those who hear it were to think that he himself was the person addressed, because the call is made not by the proper appellation but by the common name of their nature: but we separate him from the multitude by using that name which belongs to him as his own;-that, I mean, which signifies the particular subject. Thus there are many who have shared in the nature-many disciples, say, or apostles, or martyrs-but the man in them all is one; since, as has been said, the term "man" does not belong to the nature of the individual as such, but to that which is common. For Luke is a man, or Stephen is a man; but it does not follow that if any one is a man he is therefore Luke or Stephen:

but the idea of the persons admits of that separation which is made by the peculiar attributes considered in each severally, and when they are combined is presented to us by means of number; yet their nature is one, at union in itself, and an absolutely indivisible unit, not capable of increase by addition or of diminution by subtraction, but in its essence being and continually remaining one, inseparable even though it appear in plurality, continuous, complete, and not divided with the individuals who participate in it. And as we speak of a people, or a mob, or an army, or an assembly in the singular in every case, while each of these is conceived as being in plurality, so according to the more accurate expression, "man" would be said to be one, even though those who are exhibited to us in the same

nature make up a plurality. Thus it would be much better to correct our erroneous habit, so as no longer to extend to a plurality the name of the nature, than by our bondage to habit to transfer to our statements concerning God the error which exists in the above case.

But since the correction of the habit is impracticable (for how could you persuade any one not to speak of those who are exhibited in the same nature as "many men"?-indeed, in every case habit is a thing hard to change), we are not so far wrong in not going contrary to the prevailing habit in the case of the lower nature, since no harm results from the mistaken use of the name: but in the case of the statement concerning the Divine nature the various use of terms is no longer so free from danger: for that which is of small account is in these subjects no longer a small matter. Therefore we must confess one God, according to the testimony of Scripture, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one Lord," even though the name of Godhead extends through the Holy Trinity. This I say according to the account we have given in the case of human nature, in which we have learnt that it is improper to extend the name of the nature by the mark of plurality. We must, however, more carefully examine the name of "Godhead," in order to obtain, by means of the significance involved in the word, some help towards clearing up the question before us.

Most men think that the word "Godhead" is used in a peculiar degree in respect of nature: and just as the heaven, or the sun, or any other of the constituent parts of the universe are denoted by proper names which are significant of the subjects, so they say that in the case of the Supreme and Divine nature, the word "Godhead" is fitly adapted to that which it represents to us, as a kind of special name. We, on the other hand, following the suggestions of Scripture, have learnt that that nature is unnameable and unspeakable, and we say that every term either invented by the custom of men, or handed down to us by the Scriptures, is indeed explanatory of our conceptions of the Divine Nature , but does not include the signification of that nature itself. And it may be shown without much difficulty that this is the case. For all other terms which are used of the creation may be found, even without analysis of their origin, to be applied to the subjects accidentally, because we are content to denote the things in any way by the word applied to them so as to avoid confusion in our knowledge of the things signified. But all the terms that are employed to lead us to the knowledge of God have comprehended in them each its own meaning, and you cannot find any word among the terms especially applied to God which is without a distinct sense.

Hence it is clear that by any of the terms we use the Divine nature itself is not signified, but some one of its surroundings is made known. For we say, it may be, that the Deity is incorruptible, or powerful, or whatever else we are accustomed to say of Him. But in each of these terms we find a peculiar sense, fit to be understood or asserted of the Divine nature, yet not expressing that which that nature is in its essence. For the subject, whatever it may be, is incorruptible: but our conception of incorruptibility is this,-that that which is, is not resolved into decay: so, when we say that He is incorruptible, we declare what His nature does not suffer, but we do not express what that is which does not suffer corruption. Thus, again, if we say that He is the Giver of life, though we show by that appellation what He

gives, we do not by that word declare what that is which gives it. And by the same reasoning we find that all else which results from the significance involved in the names expressing the Divine attributes either forbids us to conceive what we ought not to conceive of the Divine nature, or teaches us that which we ought to conceive of it, but does not include an explanation of the nature itself.

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, and as we recognize as one of these that operation of surveying and inspection, or, as one might call it, beholding, whereby He surveys all things and overlooks them all, discerning our thoughts, and even entering by His power of contemplation into those things which are not visible, we suppose that Godhead, or qeo/thj, is so called from qe/a, or beholding, and that He who is our qeath/j or beholder, by customary use and by the instruction of the Scriptures, is called qeo/j, or God. Now if any one admits that to behold and to discern are the same thing, and that the God Who superintends all things, both is and is called the superintender of the universe, let him consider this operation, and judge whether it belongs to one of the Persons whom we believe in the Holy Trinity, or whether the power extends throughout the Three Persons. For if our interpretation of the term Godhead, or qeo/thj, is a true one, and the things which are seen are said to be beheld, or qeata/, and that which beholds them is called qeo/j, or God, no one of the Persons in the Trinity could reasonably be excluded from such an appellation on the ground of the sense involved in the word. For Scripture attributes the act of seeing equally to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. David says, "See, O God our defender ":

and from this we learn that sight is a proper operation of the idea of God, so far as God is conceived, since he says, "See, O God. But Jesus also sees the thoughts of those who condemn Him, and questions why by His own power He pardons the sins of men? for it says, "Jesus, seeing their thoughts . And of the Holy Spirit also, Peter says to Ananias, "Why hath Satan filled thine heart, to lie to the Holy Ghost? " showing that the Holy Spirit was a true witness, aware of what Ananias had dared to do in secret, and by Whom the manifestation of the secret was made to Peter. For Ananias became a thief of his own goods, secretly, as he thought, from all men, and concealing his sin: but the Holy Spirit at the same moment was in Peter, and detected his intent, dragged down as it was to avarice, and gave to Peter front Himself the power of seeing the secret, while it is clear that He could not have done this had He not been able to behold hidden things.

But some one will say that the proof of our argument does not yet regard the question. For even if it were granted that the name of "Godhead" is a common name of the nature, it would not be established that we should not speak of "Gods": but by these arguments, on the contrary, we are compelled to speak of "Gods": for we find in the custom of mankind that not only those who are partakers in the same nature, but even any who may be of the same business, are not, when they are many, spoken of in the singular; as we speak of "many orators," or "surveyors," or "farmers," or "shoemakers," and so in all other cases. If, indeed, Godhead were an appellation of nature, it would be more proper, according to the

argument laid down, to include the Three Persons in the singular number, and to speak of "One God," by reason of the inseparability and indivisibility of the nature: but since it has been established by what has been said, that the term "Godhead" is significant of operation, and not of nature, the argument from what has been advanced seems to turn to the contrary conclusion, that we ought therefore all the more to call those "three Gods" who are contemplated in the same operation, as they say that one would speak of "three philosophers" or "orators," or any other name derived from a business when those who take part in the same business are more than one.

I have taken some pains, in setting forth this view, to bring forward the reasoning on behalf of the adversaries, that our decision may be the more firmly fixed, being strengthened by the more elaborate contradictions. Let us now resume our argument.

As we have to a certain extent shown by our statement that the word "Godhead" is not significant of nature but of operation, perhaps one might reasonably allege as a cause why, in the case of men, those who share with one another in the same pursuits are enumerated and spoken of in the plural, while on the other hand the Deity is spoken of in the singular as one God and one Godhead, even though the Three Persons are not separated from the significance expressed by the term "Godhead,"-one might allege, I say, the fact that men, even if several are engaged in the same form of action, work separately each by himself at the task he has undertaken, having no participation in his individual action with others who are engaged in the same occupation. For instance, supposing the case of several rhetoricians, their pursuit, being one, has the same name in the numerous cases: but each of those who follow it works by himself, this one pleading on his own account, and that on his own account. 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. We may understand the meaning of this from one single instance. From Him, I say, Who is the chief source of gifts, all things which have shared in this grace have obtained their life. When we inquire, then, whence this good gift came to us, we find by the guidance of the Scriptures that it was from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. 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. Since then the Holy Trinity fulfils every operation in a manner-similar to that of which I have spoken, not by separate action according to the number of the Persons, but so that there is one motion and disposition of the good will which is communicated from the Father through the Son to the Spirit (for as we do not call those whose operation gives one life three Givers of life, neither do we call those who are contemplated in one goodness three Good beings, nor speak of them in the plural by any of their other attributes); so neither can we call those who exercise this Divine and superintending power and operation towards ourselves and all creation, conjointly and inseparably, by their mutual action, three Gods. For as when we learn concerning the God of the universe, from the words of Scripture, that He judges all the earth , we say that He is the Judge of all things through the Son: and again, when we hear that the Father judgeth no man , we do not think that the Scripture is at variance with itself,-(for He Who judges all the earth does this by His Son to Whom He has committed all judgment;

and everything which is done by the Only-begotten has its reference to the Father, so that He Himself is at once the Judge of all things and judges no man, by reason of His having, as we said, committed all judgment to the Son, while all the judgment of the Son is conformable to the will of the Father; and one could not properly say either that They are two judges, or that one of Them is excluded from the authority and power implied in judgment);-so also in the case of the word "Godhead," Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God, and that very power of superintendence and beholding which we call Godhead, the Father exercises through the Only-begotten, while the Son perfects every power by the Holy Spirit, judging, as Isaiah says, by the Spirit of judgment and the Spirit of burning , and acting by Him also, according to the saying in the Gospel which was spoken to the Jews. For He says, "If I by the Spirit of God cast out devils "; where He includes every form of doing good in a partial description, by reason of the unity of action: for the name derived from operation cannot be divided among many where the result of their mutual operation is one.

Since, then, the character of the superintending and beholding power is one, in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as has been said in our previous argument, issuing from the Father as from a spring, brought into operation by the Son, and perfecting its grace by the power of the Spirit; and since no operation is separated in respect of the Persons, being fulfilled by each individually apart from that which is joined with Him in our contemplation, but all providence, care, and superintendence of all, alike of things in the sensible creation and of those of supramundane nature, and that power which preserves the things which are, and corrects those which are amiss, and instructs those which are ordered aright, is one, and not three, being, indeed, directed by the Holy Trinity, yet not severed by a threefold division according to the number of the Persons contemplated in the Faith, so that each of the acts, contemplated by itself, should be the work of the Father alone, or of the Son peculiarly, or of the Holy Spirit separately, but while, as the Apostle says, the one and the selfsame Spirit divides His good gifts to every man severally , the motion of good proceeding from the Spirit is not without beginning;-we find that the power which we conceive as preceding this motion,

which is the Only-begotten God, is the maker of all things; without Him no existent thing attains to the beginning of its being: and, again, this same source of good issues from the will of the Father.

If, then, every good thing and every good name, depending on that power and purpose which is without beginning, is brought to perfection in the power of the Spirit through the Only-begotten God, without mark of time or distinction (since there is no delay, existent or conceived, in the motion of the Divine will from the Father, through the Son, to the Spirit): and if Godhead also is one of the good names and concepts, it would not be proper to divide the name into a plurality, since the unity existing in the action prevents plural enumeration. And as the Saviour of all men, specially of them that believe , is spoken of by the Apostle as one, and no one from this phrase argues either that the Son does not save them who believe, or that salvation is given to those who receive it without the intervention of the Spirit; but God who is over all, is the Saviour of all, while the Son works salvation by means of the grace of the Spirit, and yet they are not on this account called in Scripture three Saviours (although salvation is confessed to proceed from the Holy Trinity): so neither are they called three Gods, according to the signification assigned to the term "Godhead," even though the aforesaid appellation attaches to the Holy Trinity.

It does not seem to me absolutely necessary, with a view to the present proof of our argument, to contend against those who oppose us with the assertion that we are not to conceive "Godhead" as an operation. For we, believing the Divine nature to be unlimited and incomprehensible, conceive no comprehension ofit, but declare that the nature is to be conceived in all respects as infinite: and that which is absolutely infinite is not limited in one respect while it is left unlimited in another, but infinity is free from limitation altogether. That therefore which is without limit is surely not limited even by name. In order then to mark the constancy of our conception of infinity in the case of the Divine nature, we say that the Deity is above every name: and "Godhead" is a name. Now it cannot be that the same thing should at once be a name and be accounted as above every name.

But if it pleases our adversaries to say that the significance of the term is not operation, but nature, we shall fall back upon our original argument, that custom applies the name of a nature to denote multitude erroneously: since according to true reasoning neither diminution nor increase attaches to any nature, when it is contemplated in a larger or smaller number. For it is only those things which are contemplated in their individual circumscription which are enumerated by way of addition. Now this circumscription is noted by bodily appearance, and size, and place, and difference figure and colour, and that which is contemplated apart from these conditions is free from the circumscription which is formed by such categories. That which is not thus circumscribed is not enumerated, and that which is not enumerated cannot be contemplated in multitude. For we say that gold, even though it be cut into many figures, is one, and is so spoken of, but we speak of many coins or many staters, without finding any multiplication of the nature of gold by the number of staters; and for this reason we speak of gold, when it is contemplated in greater bulk, either in plate or in coin, as "much,"

but we do not speak of it as "many golds" on account of the multitude of the material,-except when one says there are "many gold pieces" (Darics, for instance, or staters), in which case it is not the material, but the pieces of money to which the significance of number applies: indeed, properly, we should not call them "gold" but "golden."

As, then, the golden staters are many, but the gold is one, so too those who are exhibited to us severally in the nature of man, as Peter, James, and John, are many, yet the man in them is one. And although Scripture extends the word according to the plural significance, where it says "men swear by the greater ," and "sons of men," and in other phrases of the like sort, we must recognize that in using the custom of the prevailing form of speech, it does not lay down a law as to the propriety of using the words in one way or another, nor does it say these things by way of giving us instruction about phrases, but uses the word according to the prevailing custom, with a view only to this, that the word may be profitable to those who receive it, taking no minute care in its manner of speech about points where no harm can result from the phrases in respect of the way they are understood.

Indeed, it would be a lengthy task to set out in detail from the Scriptures those constructions which are inexactly expressed, in order to prove the statement I have made; where, however, there is a risk of injury to any part of the truth, we no longer find in Scriptural phrases any indiscriminate or indifferent use of words. For this reason Scripture admits the naming of "men" in the plural, because no one is by such a figure of speech led astray in his conceptions to imagine a multitude of humanities, or supposes that many human natures are indicated by the fact that the name expressive of that nature is used in the plural. But the word "God" it employs studiously in the singular form only, guarding against introducing the idea of different natures in the Divine essence by the plural signification of "Gods. This is the cause why it says, "the Lord our God is one Lord ," and also proclaims the Only-begotten God by the name of Godhead, without dividing the Unity into a dual signification, so as to call the Father and the Son two Gods, although each is proclaimed by the holy writers as God. 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 if (according to the idea of those who have been led astray) the nature of the Holy Trinity were diverse, the number would by consequence be extended to a plurality of Gods, being divided according to the diversity of essence in the subjects. But since the Divine, single, and unchanging nature, that it may be one, rejects all diversity in essence, it does not admit in its own case the signification of multitude; but as it is called one nature, so it is called in the singular by all its other names, "God," "Good," "Holy," "Saviour," "Just," "Judge," and every other Divine name conceivable: whether one says that the names refer to nature or to operation, we shall not dispute the point.

If, however, any one cavils at our argument, on the ground that by not admitting the difference of nature it leads to a mixture and confusion of the Persons, we shall make to such a charge this answer;-that while we confess the invariable character of the nature, we do not deny the difference in respect of cause, and that which is caused, by which alone we

apprehend that one Person is distinguished from another;-by our belief, that is, that one is the Cause, and another is of the Cause; and again in that which is of the Cause we recognize another distinction. For one is directly from the first Cause, and another by that which is directly from the first Cause; so that the attribute of being Only-begotten abides without doubt in the Son, and the interposition of the Son, while it guards His attribute of being Only-begotten, does not shut out the Spirit from His relation by way of nature to the Father.

But in speaking of "cause," and "of the cause," we do not by these words denote nature (for no one would give the same definition of "cause" and of "nature"), but we indicate the difference in manner of existence. For when we say that one is "caused," and that the other is "without cause," we do not divide the nature by the word "cause ", but only indicate the fact that the Son does not exist without generation, nor the Father by generation: but we must needs in the first place believe that something exists, and then scrutinize the manner of existence of the object of our belief: thus the question of existence is one, and that of the mode of existence is another. To say that anything exists without generation sets forth the mode of its existence, but what exists is not indicated by this phrase. If one were to ask a husbandman about a tree, whether it were planted or had grown of itself, and he were to answer either that the tree had not been planted or that it was the result of planting, would he by that answer declare the nature of the tree? Surely not; but while saying how it exists he would leave the question of its nature obscure and unexplained. So, in the other case, when we learn that He is unbegotten, we are taught in what mode He exists, and how it is fit that we should conceive Him as existing, but what He is we do not hear in that phrase. When, therefore, we acknowledge such a distinction in the case of the Holy Trinity, as to believe that one Person is the Cause, and another is of the Cause, we can no longer be accused of confounding the definition of the Persons by the community of nature.

Thus, since on the one hand the idea of cause differentiates the Persons of the Holy Trinity, declaring that one exists without a Cause, and another is of the Cause; and since on the one hand the Divine nature is apprehended by every conception as unchangeable and undivided, for these reasons we properly declare the Godhead to be one, and God to be one, and employ in the singular all other names which express Divine attributes.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.