

GREGORY THE GREAT AND HIS BOOK *PASTORAL CARE*  
AS A COUNSELING THEORY

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## INTRODUCTION

As I have thought about Christian counseling and counseling theories the one thing that strikes me as odd is that everyone starts with Freud. Freud is responsible for counseling and psychotherapy as we know it today, however, what did the church do prior to Freud to care for people? How did the church handle counseling between the time of Christ and when Freud developed his theories? Great strides have been made in the last 150 years in the area of counseling people and we would be fools not to carefully consider these modern developments. However, prior to Freud, people had problems and received meaningful help from the church. As I looked at how the church has cared for people through history, I discovered that the church has a wonderful history of caring for souls that predates Freud by over 1200 years. This is not to say that the church was, or ever has been, perfect in dealing with people, however prior to Freud, the church was caring for its own. Both secular and Christian counseling ignores this rich history.

As I looked at this history, the book *Pastoral Care* by Gregory the Great stood out as a classic work for helping people with their struggles. “It became the prime interpreter of the tasks of pastoral care for over a millennium following Gregory.”<sup>1</sup> As I read *Pastoral Care* and I read about Gregory and about his book *Pastoral Care* I became impressed with how well

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas C. Oden and Don S. Browning, *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition*, Theology and Pastoral Care Series (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 50.

Gregory addressed contemporary issues and decided to examine Gregory's ideas and his book *Pastoral Care* as a counseling theory.

Given that *Pastoral Care* was written over 1400 years ago it cannot and should not be considered a complete counseling theory for use today. Although, it does contain many things that the counselor of today will find useful and it predates some of the principles of modern psychotherapy. *Pastoral Care* is a work worthy of review by those entering Christian counseling, especially those who will be pastoral counselors.

My examination of Gregory and *Pastoral Care* has six sections: One, Key Figures outlines the high points of Gregory's life and other figures that influenced him. Two, Philosophical Assumptions looks at Gregory's philosophy, worldview and the culture in which he wrote. Three, Model of Personality and Health that *Pastoral Care* and Gregory hold. Four, Model of Abnormality held by Gregory and *Pastoral Care*. Five, Model of Psychotherapy presented by *Pastoral Care* and Gregory. And six, a Critique of *Pastoral Care* and Gregory as a counseling theory.

When looking at many of these sections, I have inferred what Gregory believed, as Gregory did not specifically write about a model of personality, model of health, model of abnormality, etc.... These inferences are taken from his work *Pastoral Care*, his other writings, and the cultural context in which he lived.

## KEY FIGURES

Gregory the Great was born around 540 AD in Rome. “Gregory lived during a chaotic period and a great turning point of European history.”<sup>2</sup> Gregory’s father was a senator with large estates in Sicily and a mansion in Rome that Gregory converted to the Monastery of St. Andrew. In 573 AD Gregory was prefect of Rome, the highest legal official in the city, however after holding the office for a year, he left civic life, became a monk and founded six monasteries by selling his father’s estates. In 578 AD, against Gregory’s will Pope Pelagius II pulled him into public service with an appointment as ambassador to Constantinople for six years. After the death of Pope Pelagius II in 590 AD, Gregory was elected pope. Gregory attempted to flee from this role but was seized and carried to the Basilica of St. Peter. Shortly after becoming pope, Gregory wrote *Pastoral Care*. In addition as pope, “he reorganized the administration of the papal states, he maintained papal authority in the face of encroachments from the Patriarch of Constantinople, he established links with the Frankish Kingdoms, and most importantly (for these English writers), he sent a party of monks, led by Augustine, to convert the Anglo-Saxons.”<sup>3</sup>

Gregory was very influenced by the Rule of St. Benedict and Benedictine monks who came to Rome after the monastery that St. Benedict founded was burnt. In some letters, Gregory

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Purves, *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 56.

calls his work Pastoral Rule. “There is every reason to assume that Gregory in conceiving the plan for *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* [Pastoral Rule] intended to provide the secular clergy with a counterpart to this *Regula* [the Rule of St. Benedict]”<sup>4</sup> In addition, Gregory the Great’s work parallels *Orations or Discourses* the work of Gregory of Nazianzus (330-390) and *On the Priesthood* the work of St. John Chrysostom (350-407). The fact that Gregory’s work parallels other works is a clear indication that the church was thinking about caring for people well before Gregory wrote.

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<sup>3</sup> Conrad Leyser, *Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 141.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory, *Pastoral Care*, trans. Henry Davis (Westminster, Md.,: Newman Press, 1950), 10 [Translator's Introduction].

## PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Gregory is clearly Christian in his philosophical assumptions. “He was not a theological innovator, and he accepted the conciliar settlements of the major doctrinal controversies of the prior three hundred years.”<sup>5</sup>

Gregory had a profound respect for diversities and suggested that local tastes could prevail when pressed for rulings.<sup>6</sup> “This respect for diversity within the orthodox consensus and the belief that unity does not require uniformity is a Gregorian insight that bore rich fruit in the intellectual history of medieval Europe as well as in medieval theology.”<sup>7</sup>

In addition to remembering the theological climate that Gregory served in, we as modern readers must also remember the cultural and political climate. Kings and emperors were the norm during his life; while today kings and emperors are uncommon, and even disdained by an ever-increasing democratic and socialistic world. This culture of rulers and emperors also helps explain why Gregory saw *Pastoral Care* and *Pastoral Rule* as one in the same. By modern day standards, Gregory would be considered overly authoritarian. While in his day Gregory tried to get pastors to be in touch with their parish and the parish to be in touch with their pastor.

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<sup>5</sup> Purves, 59.

<sup>6</sup> Marcia L. Colish, *Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition, 400-1400*, Yale Intellectual History of the West (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 39.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

“Gregory was resolved to find a moral language that would allow those in power to sustain and be sustained by the community for which they were responsible.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Leyser, 150.

## MODEL OF PERSONALITY AND HEALTH

Gregory does not define a model of personality, like many contemporary counseling theories. However, his writings and belief in orthodox theology (remember that Gregory was not a theological innovator) would put broad boundaries on his model.

Gregory's view of health revolved around balance. In *Pastoral Care* 34 dichotomies are given. For each one Gregory discusses how either extreme is detrimental. The following are a few examples of Gregory's dichotomies: poor/rich, joyful/sad, subject/superiors, wise/dull, impudent/timid, impatient/patient, kindly/envious, humble/haughty, obstinate/fickly, and gluttonous/abstemious. Further, Gregory explains how certain traits although they appear to be virtues are in reality a vice. For example, in describing the dichotomy of impatient and patient, Gregory says the following about the patient:

...those who are patient are to be admonished not to grieve in their hearts over what they suffer outwardly. A sacrifice of such great worth which they outwardly offer unimpaired, must not be spoilt by the infection of interior malice. Besides, while their sin of grieving is not observed by man, it is visible under the divine scrutiny, and will become the worse, in proportion as they claim a show of virtue in the sight of men.

The patient must, therefore, be told to aim diligently at loving those whom they needs must put up with lest, if love does not wait on patience, the virtue that appears outwardly may be turned into a worse fault of hatred.<sup>9</sup>

In the dichotomies, Gregory shows extreme wisdom in recognizing what is seen on the outside as a virtue may not be a true reflection of the vice on the inside.

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<sup>9</sup> Gregory, 109, 110.

The overall theme in Gregory's dichotomies is balance. It is possible that this comes from Gregory's own struggles in balancing his desire for the contemplative life of a monk versus his reluctant, but active, service as ambassador to Constantinople and pope.

“The *Regula Pastoralis* was in large part devoted to describing how to reconcile the two types of life. He came to the conclusion eventually that while the contemplative life was the better and more desirable of the two, the active life was unavoidable, and indeed necessary in order to serve one's fellow man... There could be no better exemplar of the two lives than Gregory himself, but he would have been less than human had he not from time to time mourned the fact that so much of his time must be given over to the active at the expense of the contemplative.”<sup>10</sup>

Another author has given this snap shot of Gregory's approach: “Balance, practicality, and realism are Gregory's counsels.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *Consul of God : The Life and Times of Gregory the Great* (London ; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 57.

<sup>11</sup> Colish, 41.

## MODEL OF ABNORMALITY

Once again, Gregory did not give a clear definition of abnormality, although, if Gregory's view of health were summarized as balance, his view of abnormality would be unbalance. Any time a person went to one extreme, even a seemingly good extreme, Gregory would consider this abnormal.

In addition to balance, the depravity of man and man's ability for self-deception are clearly presented in *Pastoral Care*. Concerning self-deception Gregory wrote: "Hence it is that the motive hidden within is one thing, and what is taking place on the surface of their conscious mind is another. For the mind often lies to itself about itself, and makes believe that it loves the good work when actually it does not, and that it does not wish for mundane glory, when, in fact it does."<sup>12</sup> In the next section (Model of Psychotherapy), more will be said about Gregory, sub-conscious motivations and conscious motivations.

The following statement by Gregory shows that sin and guilt are other key factors in his thinking "...it is clear that nature brought forth all men in equality, while guilt has placed some below others, in accordance with the order of their varying demerits"<sup>13</sup> (Although, Gregory did not waiver on self-deception, sin and guilt he also did not waiver on loving kindness and

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<sup>12</sup> Gregory, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 60.

compassion being shown to those suffering infirmities. More on this will be said in the next section (Model of Psychotherapy).

## MODEL OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

Gregory never imaged a model where people would find meaningful help outside the community of a church or monastery. In his time and culture the idea of modern psychotherapy might not have been well received. Gregory definitely believed that when people had problems they needed to be solved in and through Christian community. This would not eliminate one on one counseling, but would put that one on one counseling in context of Christian community.

Gregory saw the pastor caring for the people in his church. Gregory said “Let the ruler be neighbor in compassion to everyone...so that by the love of his heart he may transfer to himself the infirmities of others.”<sup>14</sup> Gregory also said “All who are superiors should not regard in themselves the power of their rank, but the equality of their nature; and they should find their joy not in ruling over men, but in helping them.”<sup>15</sup>

While the pastor cared for people, preaching was used to instruct, exhort, and correct. Yet, Gregory saw the pastor’s life as more important than his sermon. “Every preacher should make himself heard rather by deeds than by words, and that by his righteous way of life should imprint footsteps for men to tread in, rather than show them by word of the way to go.”<sup>16</sup> Gregory believed that the pastor should be connected enough to people so that people would be changed by the pastor’s life and then by his words. Instead, most pastors today try to change

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 60.

people by words alone rather than by being connected enough that the pastors' life and words bring change. In modern day terms, Gregory saw the pastor providing a corrective relationship to the people in his community.

While *Pastoral Care* does not describe a model of psychotherapy, most amazingly, it anticipates some of the key elements of psychotherapy. Thomas Oden in his book *Care of Souls in the Classic Tradition* cites five instances<sup>17</sup> where Gregory anticipates modern psychotherapy.

The first is in behavior modification techniques. "Gregory's work emerged out of the creative milieu of the formative stages of Benedictine monasticism. He placed a strong emphasis upon the regular and consistent positive reinforcement of desired behaviors."<sup>18</sup> The importance of incremental change and the fact that everything could not be made perfect at once is understood when Gregory says: "Sometimes lesser vices must be disregarded so that greater ones may be removed....when the infirmities of two vices assail a man...it is best to hasten help in the case of the vice that tends to a more speedy death."<sup>19</sup>

The second area where Gregory anticipated modern psychotherapy is in the layers of unconscious motivations. "Some of Gregory's images – chiseling at the wall, opening the door of going through the door and beholding the beastly, the animal, the libidinal image inside – are much akin to the kinds of unraveling of dream images and unconscious symbolism that we find later in Freud and the psychoanalytic tradition."<sup>20</sup> In discussing Gregory's Model of Abnormality

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>17</sup> Oden and Browning, 57-58.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory, 229.

<sup>20</sup> Oden and Browning, 58.

I quoted him saying that “what is taking place on the surface of their conscious mind is another”<sup>21</sup> showing that he clearly understood the idea of a sub-conscious and conscious motivations.

The third area were Gregory predicted modern psychotherapy deals with “Jung’s affirmative view of the unconscious, of primordial fantasies, and his psychological fascination with mythic and mandalic meanings. Gregory understood well the coincidence of opposites, and the imaginative resolution of opposites into a higher syntheses or integration.”<sup>22</sup>

The fourth idea that Gregory predated modern psychotherapy is in the importance of body language. Gregory was “constantly relating the caring process to nonverbal communication. Pastor and parishioner communicate not only through words but through acts, colors, symbols, clothing and nonverbal gestures.”<sup>23</sup>

The fifth and last way that Oden states Gregory predated modern psychotherapy is client-centered therapy. “Carl Rodgers identified these three necessary and sufficient conditions for positive psychological change as accurate empathy, unconditional positive regard and self-

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<sup>21</sup> Gregory, 36.

<sup>22</sup> Oden and Browning, 58.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 59.

congruence....Each of these three points of the therapeutic triad function crucially in Gregory's pastoral care."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

## **CRITIQUE OF GREGORY AND *PASTORAL CARE***

Gregory's work is over 1400 years old; this means that it is dated which would be a serious critique of the modern reader. Many wonderful advances have been made by psychology. Chemical imbalances have been discovered and corrected with proper medicines. Modern psychology has a much better understanding of personality and how it is developed. The importance of family of origin is much clearer. The list could go on and on. The modern reader must balance Gregory's work with the findings and facts of modern psychology

*Pastoral Care* has many places where Gregory's use of types is questionable. For example, Gregory states:

What is symbolized by the Ark but Holy Church? The orders are that it is to be provided with four rings of gold in the four corners – obviously because, being extended to the four parts of the world, it is declared to be equipped with the four books of the Holy Gospels. And staves of setim wood are made and inserted into these rings for carrying, because strong and persevering teachers, like incorruptible timbers, are to be sought out, who always adhering to the instructions of the sacred volumes, proclaim the unity of the Holy Church, and, as it were, carry the Ark, by their being let into the rings.<sup>25</sup>

Here Gregory sees the Ark as type for the church, the four rings of gold as type for the Holy Gospels and the staves of setim wood as types for teachers. "Those who seek to interpret types must always remember...to locate the chief point(s) of resemblance between the

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<sup>25</sup> Gregory, 87,88.

type and its antitype, and not to press the interpretation beyond these points.”<sup>26</sup> Gregory has not located the chief points of resemblance and has pressed the interpretation beyond any points that might exist. I would disagree with the above types and most of the other types Gregory uses in *Pastoral Care*.

In the section on Philosophical Assumptions, I mention that modern day readers could consider Gregory as authoritarian because of the cultural and political climate that he wrote in. One of the problems that Modern day readers face is keeping in mind the context in which Gregory wrote and use care not to equate that context with the context of today. Should a reader fail to do this a reader could get an authoritarian view that is not healthy in today’s society.

*Pastoral Care* was originally written in Latin. An updated English translation would be a significant benefit to English readers. The current translation can be confusing and hard to follow.

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<sup>26</sup> F. Duane Lindsey, ed., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, Old Testament ed. ([CD-ROM] Electronic Edition STEP Files, Parsons Technology, Inc., 1985), s.v. "Leviticus, Introduction, Typology and the Book of Leviticus".

## CONCLUSION

Gregory the Great and his work *Pastoral Care* can be of value to the modern day Christian counselor and of tremendous value to the modern day pastoral counselor. Many of the things Gregory discusses could be put into direct use in today's counseling setting. Obviously, the modern day reader of Gregory must remember that Gregory gets carried away in his types, that his work is over 1400 years old, and that his work can be authoritarian if not interpreted with the correct contextual understanding.

If nothing else, *Pastoral Care* should be a rallying point for the Christian community that the church was doing respectable counseling 1200 years before Freud and the church anticipated many of the modern ideas of psychotherapy long before psychotherapy was in existence.

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