Equality and Pastoral Rule: Pope Gregory the Great’s Inner Conflict

WHIT TRUMBULL

Gregory the Great clearly expressed a belief in fundamental human equality. This required him to offer some explanation, if only to himself, of his position at the top of the thoroughly hierarchical social and ecclesiastical authority structure of the sixth century. While his biographers have made his difficulty in accepting his episcopal calling well known, they have paid insufficient attention to the role his egalitarian beliefs may have played in creating his distress. Some have minimized or even denied them. While, due to cultural or psychological constraints, he may never have openly acknowledged or even fully recognized the extent of the dissonance, it manifested itself in the burden he experienced in pastoral duties, the anguish he felt over his elevation to the papacy, and his longing for the contemplative life. In 590, the year he was consecrated as Pope Gregory I, known thereafter as Gregory the Great, he wrote a treatise presenting his ideas about pastoral ministry and explaining his reluctance to take the office. That work, entitled Pastoral Care in English translation, was the primary text for pastoral ministry for one thousand years afterward and enjoys the reputation of an enduring classic even today. Evidence from it, supplemented by facts known about his life and gleaned from his correspondence, establishes the existence of his egalitarian beliefs and suggests some ways in which Gregory attempted to reconcile his power and authority with them.

Gregory’s egalitarianism

The evidence for Gregory’s belief in fundamental human equality includes unequivocal written statements affirming it and objected to slavery. In Pastoral Care 2.6, Gregory lays out an egalitarian foundation as he instructs rulers regarding the disastrous consequences of the failure to remember the basic fact of human equality. He advises, “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.” The dangers of forgetting this fundamental truth include violation of the natural order of things, pride, and, ultimately, alignment with Lucifer against God. In explaining God’s words to Noah and his sons after the flood, Gregory comments:

Fear and dread were prescribed for all the beasts of the earth, but forbidden to be exercised over men. By nature a man is made superior to the beasts, but not to other men; it is therefore said to him that he is to be feared by beasts, but not by men. Evidently, to wish to be feared by an equal is to lord it over others, contrary to the natural order.

Pride, the vice Gregory dreaded most, is the natural consequence when a ruler forgets equality:

Forgetful of what he is . . . he despises his subjects and does not acknowledge them to be his equals in the order of nature, and those whom he has exalted by the fortuity of power, he believes he has also surpassed by the merits of his life.

Finally, through pride, “man is made like the apostate angel [Lucifer] when he disdains, though a man, to be like other men.”

In light of his belief in equality, Gregory advocated the emancipation of slaves, though he apparently accepted the social institution as expedient while urging their good and just treatment. In Pastoral Care 3.5, Gregory admonishes slave owners “that they offend God by priding themselves on His gift to them [slaves], and not realizing that they who are held in subjection by reason of their state of life, are their equals in virtue of their common nature.” Gregory’s biographer Jeffrey Richards cites evidence that the pope gave slaves as gifts and enforced the return of runaways to their masters and points out that Gregory viewed the differences in status among humans as approved of and willed by God. He claims that “Gregory’s social thought involved no concepts of egalitarianism.” However, as evidence, Richards cites passages from Gregory’s writing in which the pope clearly affirms his egalitarian beliefs while also justifying the class system of slavery and supporting the existing social order. Richards also cites a letter in which Gregory refers to “the law of nations” as the subjugating force of slavery. Thus, we see that Gregory viewed slaves’ obedience as God’s will, but not necessarily their enslavement. His pragmatic acceptance of the institution of slavery did not diminish his egalitarian idealism. The fact that Gregory found it necessary to make this argument shows that he was aware of the conflict between ideals and reality. Elsewhere, Richards provides a refutation of his own assertion that Gregory was not an egalitarian when he quotes the following “little homily on the exercise of power” from a letter Gregory wrote to an imperial officer:

There is this difference between the kings of the barbarian nations and the Roman emperor, that the former have slaves for their subjects, the latter free men. And therefore, in all your acts, your first object should be to maintain justice, your second to preserve a perfect liberty. You ought to value the liberty of those you are appointed to judge as jealously as though it were your own; and if you would not be wronged yourself by your superiors, you should guard with respect the liberty of your inferiors.

Gregory viewed freedom based on equality as a virtue comparable to justice and, in an application of Christ’s Golden Rule, called for those in authority to protect the liberty of others.
In addition, there is evidence that Gregory even considered the equality of women. In an article originally published in The Catholic Historical Review, Walter Wilkins gives a number of original arguments to show that, while not entirely free of the stereotypes and prejudices against women that were common to his time, Gregory interacted with women as a bishop and a pastor on a surprisingly egalitarian basis. He identified with women in their suffering, thereby encouraging and empowering them. He wrote to Theoctista, sister to Emperor Maurice, urging her to take action to protect herself when attacked, giving her the example of Peter defending his actions in Acts 11.11 He gave encouragement to Gregoria, a lady of the empress's bedchamber who was repenting for her sins, by reminding her that the mouth of Mary, a sinner, had the honor of announcing the Lord’s resurrection and her hands the privilege of holding his feet.12 Gregory carried on correspondence with women to whom he acted as a spiritual advisor, such as the patrician widow Rusticiana, and with numerous powerful women, including Theodelinda the Lombard queen, Brunhild of the Franks, Queen Bertha of England, and Empresses Leontia and Constantina. He debates theological issues with them and solicits their assistance in church reforms and matters of state.13 In an ecclesiastical controversy over whether menstruating women should be barred from communion to protect the sacraments from contamination by their impurity, Gregory advocated leaving the choice to women on the grounds that menstruation was natural and involuntary. In taking this position, he was following reasoning Augustine had given on the ejaculatory dreams of men and extending it to benefit women.14 Finally, in Pastoral Care 3.27, Gregory advised husbands and wives to please each other through mutual consideration (though they should pursue sexual intercourse for procreation and not for pleasure), mutual patience with each other's faults, and mutual encouragement through sharing each other's burdens.15 Wilkins notes that Gregory required that both partners agree to the dissolution of a marriage if one of them wanted to join a monastic order.16

Gregory taught that living one's beliefs was essential, especially for those in positions of leadership. He emphasized this in Pastoral Care as a central idea in his instruction to pastors:

For one who by the exigency of his position must propose the highest ideals, is bound by that same exigency to give a demonstration of those ideals. His voice penetrates the hearts of his hearers the more readily, if his way of life commends what he says. What he enjoins in words, he will help in execution by example.17

Gregory's commitment to live out his principles was so strong that his fasting and ascetic practices led to serious health problems. His contemporaries testified that, despite frequent illnesses, he was tireless in his work and never rested.18 Thus, for Gregory to have believed in equality and never to have attempted to affirm it through actions would have been uncharacteristic. He was, however, also a man who prized balance in all things,19 continually tempering his positions with caution and restraint. He could be quite pragmatic in pursuing gains for the kingdom of God where he saw they might be achieved.20 Thus, the tension between his ideals of freedom and equality and the hierarchical milieu in which he existed was only one of many tensions in his life, with which he coped partly through his writing.

**Gregory's purpose in writing *Pastoral Care***

What was Gregory's purpose in writing *Pastoral Care*? Was he writing a Rule for pastoring or an apology for pastoral rule? Scholars often theorize that he wrote it to give clergy a guidebook for ministry similar to St. Benedict's Rule for cenobitic monastics.21 Certainly, the book was treated as such for centuries after he wrote it in A.D. 590, his first year on the throne of St. Peter.22 This supposition is at odds with his stated intention, however, and his unspoken agenda may have been even more different. In the opening paragraph, Gregory himself said that he was writing in response to a letter of chastisement (from the bishop to whom he dedicated the work) for his attempt to escape the burdens of pastoral care.23 One clue to Gregory’s mindset is the title he gave the work, which in Latin was Liber Regulae Pastoralis (The Book of Pastoral Rule). Gregory’s English translator, Davis, comments that the Latin title more accurately reflects the book's content than does its traditional English translation, *Pastoral Care*.24 Biographer R. A. Markus theorizes that he wrote as a kind of self-therapy to reconcile himself to the papal office as he mourned the permanent loss of the contemplative life he so deeply desired.25 Richards agrees that using writing as a means of dealing with tension and inner conflict is characteristic of Gregory and notes how much attention he devotes to the conflict between the active and contemplative lives in *Pastoral Care*.26 In its pages, Gregory also paid much attention to justifying why some people should rule over others, even though all are equal. This was a question he had to answer before he could find a way to accept a throne at the pinnacle of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

**Gregory's burden**

In view of the crushing burden that awaited him, Gregory’s desire to avoid the papal office was all too understandable. Rome and its populace had been ravaged by war, invasion, disease, flooding, and famine. Immediately following his election, Gregory called for repentance and prayer processions throughout the city of Rome. People dropped dead on the streets as the processions passed; eighty people died of the plague during one procession alone.22 Furthermore, attack by the Lombards was an imminent threat, the Roman garrison had gone on strike, and recent flooding had destroyed the city’s stores of grain.23 Gregory felt inadequate not only because of the enormity of the challenges before him, but also because of the seriousness with which he took pastoral responsibility. A letter he wrote at the time indicates that he was grieving the loss of his former life, slipping into a deep depression, and feeling undeserving of his elevation to such a po-
sition of power. In October 590, the month following his consecration, he mourned for:

all that I inwardly lost, when I outwardly ascended, without having deserved it, to the summit of power. Know that my sorrow is so great, that I hardly can express it. The darkness caused by my melancholy obscures my vision. Everything I see is mournful and all that people think will console me is lamentable to my heart.29

By the following January, he had finished writing Pastoral Care, accepted his calling as a divine command, and, as he wrote to an archbishop, “recovered a more cheerful frame of mind.”30 What comforts had the newly consecrated pope found to soothe his anguish?

Gregory’s justification of pastoral rule

Gregory made peace with his calling as he wrote Pastoral Care, putting forth many justifications for pastoral rule. First, he reasons that accepting a ruling office is an act of obedience and an expression of love for God. He recalls what the risen Lord Jesus said to Peter, who had betrayed him:

And when Simon replied at once that he loved Him, he was told: If thou lovest me, feed my sheep. If then, the care of feeding is a testimony of love, he who, abounding in virtues, refuses to feed the flock of God, is convicted of having no love for the Supreme Shepherd.31

Gregory feared failure, but he dreaded disobedience more:

Let those therefore who conceal within themselves the word of preaching, hear with terror the divine judgment against them, so that fear may expel fear from their hearts. Let them hear that he who would not lay out his talent lost it, and condemnation was added to the loss.32

To the Bishop of Corinth, he wrote:

I wished to avoid this burden, lest I fail in the pastoral rule through my imperfect discharge of its duties. But as it is impossible to resist the ordinances of God, I have obediently followed what the merciful hand of the Lord has been pleased to work out for me.33

The corollary to the pastor’s obedience in ruling is the subjects’ obedience in accepting rule.34 Gregory taught that subjects were not even to criticize their superiors. Even when bad rulers did wrong, as Saul did, Gregory believed that Christians should follow the example of David in responding to the abuse. David did not strike out against his persecutor when he had the opportunity because David had such great respect for God’s choice: “For when we offend those set over us, we oppose the ordinance of Him who set them above us.”35

But why would God elevate one human being above another if all are created equal? Gregory believed that sin made equality a practical impossibility and that being ruled was the consequence of sin:

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. This diversity, which results from vice, is a dispensation of the divine judgment, much as one man must be ruled by another, since all men cannot be on an equal footing.36

Gregory even asserted that being poorly led was a punishment for sin:

Unfitness of pastors does, in truth, often accord with the deserts of their subjects, because, even if the former have not the light of knowledge through their own fault, it is due to a severe judgment that through their ignorance they, too, who follow, should stumble.37

Gregory understood that a logical problem in his argument was created by one sinner ruling over another. Gregory asked in Pastoral Care 3.4, “with what conscience can the ruler of souls use his pastoral rank among others, if he himself is engaged in those earthly occupations which he should reprehend in others?”38 By positing a hierarchy of merit, he relieved some of his discomfort with the hierarchy of power. He set high expectations for upstanding pastoral character and morality demonstrated through actions. He further comforted himself by promoting the ideal of servant leadership, understanding the exercise of authority as a ministry undertaken for the good of the subjects.39 He cited the unassailable example of Jesus, who left “the bosom of His Father” to shepherd us40 and recalled the Lord’s instruction to the disciples in Matthew 20:25–28, in which he taught that they should not rule over each other as the Gentiles did.41 Gregory wrote “that man is rightly regarded as a hypocrite, who diverts the ministry of government to purposes of domination.”42 This pope understood that the factors justifying the elevation of an individual as a ruler were no cause for boasting, as they are gifts given by God for the good of the whole body;43 Thus, he could also view the envy-destroying unity of the body of Christ as a justification for ruling authority in that gifts given to the body become community property:

Therefore in the very arrangement of the body we observe what we ought to fulfill in our actions... those things are ours which we love in others, even if we cannot imitate them, and what is loved in ourselves becomes the possession of those who love it.44

Finally, the desperate circumstances in Rome, which called for desperate measures, put Gregory in an apocalyptic frame of mind. The urgency of the end made evangelism paramount, providing a final and expedient justification for a pastoral hierarchy devoted to preaching the gospel. This concern warranted the expenditure of Gregory’s energies and resources in sending missionaries to places like England and Sardinia and in writing books like Pastoral Care.45

Conclusion

An analysis of Gregory’s historical position shows that, in Pastoral Care, Gregory worked out a theory of hierarchy that contradicted
his own egalitarian leanings and influenced the church for centuries. Church historians have credited him with a legacy that guided the church until the Reformation. Through writing, church administration, and missions, he strengthened and extended the influence of the See of St. Peter, transmitting the fundamentals of Augustinian thought, championing monasticism, and passing on the exegetical methods that characterized the Middle Ages. The mainline church remained strongly hierarchical until one particular doctrine, especially prized by the Reformers, received widespread attention. The Reformers taught the priesthood of all believers in response to corruption in the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the misuse of power, the very dangers that Gregory foresaw. This Reformation revival of a doctrine taught in the first place by St. Peter began to reestablish a more egalitarian basis for interaction in the church. Changes resulting from this shift were as great as those that had occurred in Gregory’s time after the fall of the Roman Empire.

Notes


4. Pastoral Care, 60.

5. Pastoral Care, 61.

6. Pastoral Care, 62.

7. Pastoral Care, 101. In note 23, translator Davis gives a lengthy and interesting discussion of Gregory’s actions related to slavery, citing his “most emphatic” espousal of the Christian principle of equality and quoting at length from a document of manumission that Gregory wrote freeing two Roman slaves.


17. Pastoral Care, 48 (2.3).

18. Richards, Consul of God, 44–47; Purves, Pastoral Theology, 57; Dudden, Gregory the Great, 243.

19. Purves, Pastoral Theology, 60–62. See his discussion of consideratio, which entails balancing reflection and action, versus contemplatio, and of the importance to Gregory’s worldview of seeing the world as sacramental, in which the physical represents the spiritual.


21. Henry Davis, foreword to Pastoral Care, 10; Purves, Pastoral Theology, 63; See Richards, Consul of God, 33–35 for discussion of whether St. Benedict’s Rule was used at St. Andrews, the monastery that Gregory founded on his family estate and where he lived for several years.

22. Davis, foreword to Pastoral Care, 10; Dudden, Gregory the Great, 239–40.

23. Pastoral Care, 20.

24. Davis, introduction to Pastoral Care, 3. Davis explains that the title in English translation, Pastoral Care, probably comes from the opening words “Pastoralis curae me pondera.”


26. Richards, Consul of God, 57. There is evidence that the contemplative life for Gregory represented an escape from the burdens of authority, as it represented a way to participate in monastic life without ruling by founding a community and naming another as abbot. See Richards, 32–33 for discussion.


28. Batiffol, Saint Gregory the Great, 63–64; Dudden, Gregory the Great, 211.

29. Gregory, letter to Narses, October 590, qtd. in Batiffol, Saint Gregory the Great, 62.

30. Gregory, letter to Archbishop Natalis of Salona, January 591, qtd. in Richards, Consul of God, 43.

31. Pastoral Care, 30.

32. Pastoral Care, 177–78.

33. Gregory, letter to Bishop of Corinth, qtd. in Dudden, Gregory the Great, 228.

34. Markus, Gregory the Great and His World, 31.

35. Pastoral Care, 99–100. The idea was later used in support of the Medieval feudal system; see the conclusion on Gregory’s legacy to the thought of the Middle Ages.

36. Pastoral Care, 60.

37. Pastoral Care, 23.

38. Pastoral Care, 70.


40. Pastoral Care, 31–32.

41. Pastoral Care, 65.

42. Pastoral Care, 65.

43. Markus, Gregory the Great and His World, 30, cites material in support of this point from Gregory’s Moralia in Iob. He claims that paternalism did not concern Gregory. The quote shows that Gregory thought Paul taught that mutual submission in love would free us from the power of sin, the source of hierarchy.

44. Pastoral Care, 114–15.

45. Richards, Consul of God, 66.

46. Purves, Pastoral Theology, 56.

47. Richards, Consul of God, 265–66.


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