

Meditations of the Heart - Reflections on the Scriptures

Psalm 19:14 *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

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Meditation of the Heart: The Trinity

This is a test. I'm going to say a word. Please be very aware of what your internal response is to that word. The word is: *Differential calculus.*

Some of you may have no reaction to the word. Perhaps you've never heard of it or don't know what it is. Or perhaps you've heard of the word but haven't ever had to take the subject in school.

Others of you, particularly those who are engineers or studied engineering, not only took differential calculus but even use differential calculus in some form to this day. (However, at the same time, you're sure glad for the computer software that now does the calculus work for you!)

Then there are those of you (like myself) who had to take the subject in school but, at the time, you weren't sure why you had to take it and, besides, ever since you barely passed the class by the seat of your pants, you've never had a need to actually use what you learned in that class in the first place.

Here's another word. What is your reaction to this word? *Theology*

For some of you, your eyes sort of glazed over and you thought to yourself "Yeah, whatever". Some of you thought of some negative church experience where you were taught something that was 'theological' but you didn't really understand what you were being taught or why you might ever need to know this 'theological information' or why it would ever matter to your faith as a follower of Jesus.

I once attended a fund raising dinner put on by a Christian missions agency. I happened to be seated next to a woman who was representing her church's missions committee. Her church was a well-known, reputable Baptist congregation with a highly respected pastor. I had a number of friends who attended this same church. So, I was a little surprised when this woman began talking about 'theology' and how it just didn't matter to her. What really mattered to her was her relationship with Jesus.

Now, let's compare theology to differential calculus. For many who are required, for one particular academic degree or another, to take it, differential calculus is a subject that seems difficult in theory. Differential calculus certainly has very important functions in our world, but few people, even amongst those who have to study the subject, ever actually use differential calculus.

Meanwhile, in comparison to differential calculus, theology is something that everyone actually uses and does - without even realizing it. In regards to the woman for whom her relationship with Jesus mattered more than any type of theology, I agree that having an over-emphasis (or over-zealousness) on making sure one has the 'right theology' can potentially choke the vibrancy of one's relationship to Jesus. On the other hand, if one is going to know God, one cannot get away from theology. Indeed, it might well be said that everyone, even the atheist, is a theologian (they believe *something* about God and His existence). As Evagrius Ponticus has said in the 4th century, "A theologian is one whose prayer is true. If you truly pray, you are a theologian."

I bring all this up because I want to draw your attention to some different ways that we think about the Trinity, of God in three Persons. There are ways to think rightly about the Trinity and there are ways of thinking about the Trinity that are hardly in accord with Scripture even when it might sound right.

Over the next three weeks, we'll look at three different errors pertaining to the Trinity. Today, I'll briefly consider the specific error of modalism (or Sabellianism - named after a man known as Sabellius who started this error). Sabellius taught that Jesus Christ is fully God. In that, he would be correct. The problem was that Sabellius stressed that Jesus was one mode in which God appeared to man. In other words, in the Old Testament, Sabellius stressed, God revealed Himself as the Father. In the days of the New Testament, God revealed Himself as the Son and, in the days of the early church (and following), God has revealed Himself as the Holy Spirit.

Sabellius taught that God comes to us at different times in different modes (hence, the name modalism). In other words, God is not, in Sabellius' view, eternally God in three persons, but rather, the Father, Son and Spirit are simply different modes of revealing the same divine person.

A Biblical understanding of the Trinity however holds that there are three persons who are NOT three gods NOR are they three parts or MODES of God, but rather, three persons who are co-equally and co-eternally God.

Consider, for example, Genesis 1:26-27 - **26Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." 27So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.**

In terms of who "us" and "our" means ('Let US make man in OUR image after OUR likeness...'), God can't be speaking of angels or any other created being. He can only be speaking of His only begotten Son - this Jesus of whom Paul writes (in Colossians 1:15-20): **15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. 19For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.**

What we must make of this, then, is that Jesus cannot be simply a mode of God appearing. There is something quite eternal about this Son of God, Jesus the Christ, and understanding that matters very much to us as we know Him and walk with Him, trust Him and worship Him.

Therefore, we dare not dismiss the theology of the Trinity as "the result of philosophical speculation carried out in ivory towers, cut off from real life. it is the result of ordinary believers trying to make sense of the facts of God's self-revelation - and trying to live in light of those facts"¹.

¹ Johnson, Darrell W., *Experiencing The Trinity*, (Vancouver, British Columbia, Regent College Publishing, 2002), p. 39.