

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

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We've been looking recently at some of the more common errors pertaining to the Trinity. Two weeks ago, we looked at what is known as 'modalism' or 'Sabellianism' which is the idea that God comes to us at different times in different modes. In this view, God is not eternally God *in three persons*, but rather, the Father, Son and Spirit are simply different modes of revealing the same divine person.

It sounds good (sort of) but a more Biblically accurate understanding of the Trinity holds that there are three persons who are NOT three gods NOR are they three parts or three MODES of God, but, rather, they are three Persons who are coequally and co-eternally one God.

The second erroneous understanding of the Trinity that we have looked at, and indeed, a much more prevalent and even destructive (to the church) view of the Trinity is the error of Arianism or 'Subordinationism'. In this view, God the Father is foremost divine, but the Son and Spirit possess a lesser aspect of divinity from the Father. Subordination even goes so far as to say that the Son of God was created, as opposed to having eternally existed with the Father, the idea being that "there was a time when the Son was not".

The third error of the Trinity is that of Tri-theism. As Darrell Johnson notes, this is what happens when "you affirm that God exists in three distinct persons and that the three persons are equally divine, but [neglect the Biblical understanding of] the oneness of God... Although this heresy never gained an official status it surfaces more often than we care to admit."¹

The best example I can give you of Tri-theism comes straight from the lips of a very well-meaning Christian who was leading a group of people in a time of worship. As he introduced a praise song by elaborating on the Trinity, this young man said, "Father, Son and Spirit: Three great Gods."

On the contrary, when we consider the words of Jesus in the Gospels, we can scarcely get the idea that there are somehow three Gods:

John 1:18 No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Mark 12:29 Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.'"

John 17:11 11And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

¹ Johnson, Darrell W., [Experiencing The Trinity](#), (Vancouver, British Columbia, Regent College Publishing. 2002), p. 44.

In view of learning what the Trinity is not, let us now consider, in a positive sense, how to understand what the Trinity IS. The framework for us to begin to do that is through an understanding of personal relationship. To begin going down that road, the remainder of this Meditation of the Heart will be from the pen of Eugene Peterson, from a brief excerpt of his book, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places - A Conversation in Spiritual Theology*.

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'Trinity' is the theological formulation that most adequately provides a structure for keeping conversations on the Christian life coherent, focused, and personal. Early on the Christian community realized that everything about us - our worshipping and learning, conversing and listening, teaching and preaching, obeying and deciding, working and playing, eating and sleeping - takes place in the 'country' of the Trinity, that is, in the presence and among the operations of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. If God's presence and work are not understood to define who we are and what we are doing, nothing we come up with will be understood and lived properly.

In reality, [the Trinity] is our most exuberant intellectual venture in thinking about God.³ Trinity is a conceptual attempt to provide coherence to God as God is revealed variously as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in our Scriptures: God is emphatically personal; God is only and exclusively God in relationship. Trinity is not an attempt to explain or define God by means of abstractions (although there is some of that, too), but a witness that God reveals himself as personal and in personal relations.

The down-to-earth consequence of this is that God is rescued from the speculations of the meta-physicians and brought boldly into a community of men, women, and children who are called to enter into this communal life of love, an emphatically personal life where they experience themselves in personal terms of love and forgiveness, of hope and desire. Under the image of the Trinity we discover that we do not know God by defining him but by being loved by him and loving in return.

The consequences of this are personally revelatory: another does not know me, nor do I know another, by defining or explaining, by categorizing or by psychologizing, but only relationally, by accepting and loving, by giving and receiving. The personal and interpersonal provide the primary images (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) for both knowing God and being known by God. This is living, not thinking about living; living with, not performing for.

² Browning, Robert, 'A Grammarian's Funeral', in *The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning*, (New York: Modern Library, 1934), p. 169.

³ Barrett, William, 'The Faith To Will', *The American Scholar* (Autumn 1978): 526.

And so these conversations in spiritual theology [what Peterson goes on to write about in the aforementioned book] are set in this Trinity-mapped country in which we know and believe in and serve God: the Father and creation, the Son and history, and the Spirit and community.

There is far more to Trinity than getting a theological dogma straight; the country of the Trinity comprehends creation (the world in which we live), history (all that happens to and around us), and community (the ways we personally participate in daily living in the company of all the others in the neighborhood). Trinity isn't something imposed on us, it is a witness to the co-inherence of God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and the co-inherence of our lives in the image of God (where we are, what is happening, and who we are as we speak and act and engage in personal relations with one another).

Trinity maps the country in which we know and receive and obey God. It is not the country itself, but a map of the country. And a most useful map it is, for God is vast and various, working visibly and invisibly. Left to ourselves we often get lost in blind alleys, get tangled up in the thickets, and don't have a clue to where we are. The map locates us; it provides the vocabulary and identifies the experience by which we can explore God when there are no signs pointing to him, when there are no neatly lettered labels defining the odd shape or feeling that is in front of our eyes.

There is this also to be said about a map. Even though a map is an artifact, something made, it is not arbitrarily imposed on the land. It comes out of careful observation and accurate recording of what is actually there. It is required that maps be honest. And there is also this: maps are humble - they don't pretend to substitute for the country itself. Studying the map doesn't provide experience of the country. The purpose of the map is to show us the way into the country and prevent us from getting lost in our travels.⁴

⁴ Peterson, Eugene, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places - A Conversation in Spiritual Theology*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005, pp.6-8.