

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.*

Pastor Matt Cadora

August 20, 2010

Meditation of the Heart: The Trinity

Last week, we looked at the erroneous understanding of the Trinity that is known as 'modalism' or 'Sabellianism'. 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 three MODES of God, but that they are three persons who are coequally and co-eternally one God.

A second erroneous understanding of the Trinity is what is known as 'Subordinationism'. This view describes God the Father as being 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. A more common name to describe this error is the term 'Arianism', named for Arius who is famous for saying, "There was a time when the Son was not."

A little history behind this matter: In the city of Alexandria, Arius was an influential pastor who taught 1) that the Word of God who took on human flesh (Jesus) was not truly God, 2) that he possessed a different nature from God and 3) therefore, that Jesus was not eternal. In other words, Arius argued that Jesus was created. Arius taught that Christians should not see Jesus as truly God, but rather as an *approximation* of God, a lesser being than God. Arius is known to have said, "The Son has a beginning, but God is without beginning." This teaching appealed to many because it was closely tied to paganistic beliefs that there is one God and then a number of lesser beings who do His work. It was culturally pleasing to view Christ as a type of divine hero – higher than a human being, but lesser than God. Being a charismatic preacher, Arius even put his beliefs into catchy and popular tunes which people liked to sing.

The Bishop of Alexandria, meanwhile, was a man named Alexander who recognized Arius' teaching as being very dangerous for the Church. Alexander taught that the Word of God existed from all eternity and was co-eternal with the Father. The Church had always worshipped Jesus Christ as fully God. John's Gospel clearly makes the point:

John 1:1-3

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

Paul's letter to the Colossians makes a similar point, speaking of Christ, that:

Colossians 1:15-20

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For 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. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And 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. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Clearly, Arius' teaching was in contradiction to the Scriptures and, as far as Alexander was concerned, Arius' beliefs would cause the Church to either 1) worship a creature or 2) refrain from worshipping Jesus altogether. Alexander oversaw an assembly of pastors that excommunicated Arius for his teachings. With Arius' connections and popularity, however, riots erupted in Alexandria. This resulted in the now famous Council of Nicea (ca. 325 A.D.), wherein bishops (pastors and church leaders) came from all parts to confer on the matter. The bishops recognized the danger of Arius' teaching, affirmed Alexander's condemnation of Arius, and put together the Nicene Creed, which has, for centuries since, been the most universally accepted standard of orthodoxy for the church, in both the east and the west. Check the Nicene Creed out at <http://www.ccel.org/creeds/nicene.creed.html> .

It is easy to think that, from a theological standpoint, the Nicene Creed settled the matter for the Church. In reality, it was just the beginning. Over the next 50+ years, the Arians would gain, lose and regain power (and favor) within the Roman empire and the damage would take a great toll on the Church. As St. Jerome would write (and personally observe, having been born circa 347), "The entire world woke from a deep slumber and discovered that it had become Arian." Eventually, thanks, in part, to Divine providence and preservation, and, humanly speaking, thanks in no small part to Church leaders such as Athanasius, desert fathers such as Anthony, and, after them, three pastor-theologians known as the Great Cappadocians (Basil the Great, his brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus). In 381, another Church Council was convened known as the Council of Constantinople, where the teachings of the Nicene Creed were ratified, settling the matter for the Church over the belief "in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made."¹

Now, lest we think this 'ancient' history is not relevant for today, consider the words of James Houston. Dr. Houston explains that it was through this Arian heresy of de-emphasizing the Divinity of Christ that the door was opened up for many in the middle east to begin to see Jesus as a prophet but not as God. Says Dr. Houston, "Instead of being so mad at the Muslims, we should see that it was Christian heresy that laid the foundation for another religion (Islam)... It was a disobedient church that provided the seed bed for another religion."²

¹ The Nicene Creed.

² Houston, Dr. James, Lecture on 'The Alexandrine School Of Psalm Commentators', in his class on The Devotional Use of the Psalms in the History of the Christian Church, Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, May 27, 2009.

Well, I know it's a lot to think about. I'll leave you with this to chew on. What is the most famous Bible verse known to man? Let's presume that the answer is John 3:16 - **16"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. (NASV)**³

Have you ever wondered what the difference between the words 'begotten' and 'created' is? C.S. Lewis puts it this way:

*"We don't use the words 'begetting' or 'begotten' much in modern English, but everyone knows what they mean. To beget is to become the father of; to create is to make. And the difference is this: When you beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself. A human being begets human babies, a beaver begets little beavers, and a bird begets eggs which turn into little birds. But when you make (create), you make something of a different kind from yourself. A bird makes a nest, a beaver builds a dam, a human makes a radio; or he may make something more like himself than a radio, say a statue... What God creates is not God; just as what humans create is not human. What God begets is God; just as what humans beget is human."*⁴

As Darrell Johnson goes on to explain, "The Father has been the source of the personal distinction eternally. That is, the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son... Now, whereas you and I are begotten by our parents in time, God the Son is eternally begotten by God the Father. As the Apostle John says in John 1:18, the Word (the Son) has always been the only begotten God who is eternally in the bosom of the Father."⁵

When considering the Trinity, I think we, as Christians, have to accept that we cannot, in our finite minds, understand everything about the Trinity. Paul Jewett addresses that very matter in explaining how we must accept the Trinity as a mystery, as "something which no rational argument can ultimately demonstrate and which no empirical reality can conclusively illustrate." "The church did not formulate the doctrine of the Trinity in order to resolve the mystery of God's self-revelation, but rather to preserve that mystery."⁶

³ New American Standard Version. I use this rather than my preferred English Standard Version because the ESV leaves out the word 'begotten' though the meaning of 'begotten' is certainly implied and present in the original Greek.

⁴ Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity*, MacMillan Publishing Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1952, p. 138.

⁵ Johnson, Darrell W., *Experiencing The Trinity*, (Vancouver, British Columbia, Regent College Publishing, 2002), p. 49.

⁶ Jewett, Paul K., *God, Creation and Revelation: A Neo-Evangelical Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991. quoted in Johnson, Darrell W., *Experiencing The Trinity*, (Vancouver, British Columbia, Regent College Publishing, 2002), p. 40. [Darrell Johnson's book is an extremely helpful resource for this document.]