

# SABELLIANISM

## Introduction

In addressing what are called ‘the Great Heresies,’ it is important for us to recall that heresies usually represent what Alister McGrath has called ‘a failed attempt at orthodoxy,’ (*Heresy* [London, SPCK, 2009] p. 13) an attempt to make sense of the Bible that fails to take into account the full richness of the Biblical revelation; rather than being outright repudiation of the Bible. The result is that a part of the truth is treated as the whole of the truth, and thus becomes an untruth. The reason for this is not that the Bible itself is unclear, but that ‘untaught and unstable men’ twist it to fit their own worldly thinking.

To speak of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity is practically to invite misunderstanding, suggesting as the very phrase does that the Trinity is an invention of theologians. On the contrary, it must be emphasized that the New Testament is a fully Trinitarian document; as Leon Morris has put it, ‘the deity of Christ was held from a very early date. It is not to be regarded as the culmination of a process of slow growth and reflection’ (*The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* [Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1959] p. 111). Despite the common accusation that the doctrine of the Trinity is the result of imposing an alien philosophy on the Bible, the reverse is the case; it is non-Trinitarian teachings that are the result of imposing alien philosophies on the text of Scripture. Orthodoxy came first, since it is the Scriptural teaching; heresy, the result most often of attempts to explain what cannot be explained, comes later, working on the Biblical revelation and distorting it. Orthodox theologians were then forced to go back and explain what the Bible actually says so as to refute false and distorted claims about the Bible’s teachings.

## Definition

One of the most fundamental questions that exercised the early Church was this, what is the relationship between Jesus and God? ‘What think ye of Christ?’ The early Church was convinced of the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was and is ‘Emmanuel, God with us’, but problems arose when attempts were made to explain, rather than just communicate, the deity of Christ to those outside the Church. It is an all too common problem that Apologists, those

seeking to defend the faith, become enamored of philosophy, and then try to fit the Bible into philosophical categories, rather than being first and foremost students of the Scriptures. Inevitably, there were those who rather than taking into account the whole of the Biblical revelation, instead only looked at a part of that revelation, and as a result fell into heresy. One of the first of these heresies was that of Sabellianism, otherwise known as Modalism. As the second name suggests, Sabellianism teaches that a unipersonal God reveals himself in three ‘modes’ or manifestations, so that he is successively Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Where orthodox Trinitarians have spoken of ‘one Substance and three Persons’, Modalists speak of ‘One Substance and three modes.’ The difference is a vital one. As J.C.W. Wand explains, ‘In their view, there never were any permanent distinctions within the Godhead, but only three temporary phases in the operations of one divine person... when the need for these modes or phases of activity was passed the Godhead assumed its undifferentiated character once more.’ (*The Early Church* [London, Methuen, 1937] p. 86). Professor Henry Gwatkin of Cambridge University noted that, in Sabellian thought, ‘The Trinity is purely economic and temporal, and corresponds no doubt to the needs of this world, but to nothing in the eternal world.’ (*Early Church History to AD 313* [London, Macmillan, 1912] Vol. 2, p. 188).

Like all the ancient heresies, it has been revived over and over again in the history of the Church. The great issue is the central one of Christianity, ‘What think ye of Christ?’ From the Bible, two issues are crystal-clear, the first of which is that there is only one God, as stated in the Shema In Deuteronomy 6:4, ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one.’ The second, that Jesus Christ is God. He is ‘God with us’ (Matthew 1:23), ‘God was manifested in the flesh’ (1 Timothy 3:16). Where the Sabellians erred was in how they interpreted these texts.

### **History**

While the heresy has been given the name of Sabellius, it seems to have been a man named Praxeas, who flourished around 190 AD, in conflict with the Gnostics, who first explicitly taught a Modalist view of God. We can better understand how Modalism came about when we recall that the Gnostics taught that the true God was absolutely unknown and unknowable, removed from man, ineffable and transcendent. Initially a champion of orthodoxy

against heresy, Praxeas fell into heresy himself when, rather than allowing the Bible's balanced teaching to guide him while trying to oppose one extreme, he fell into the opposite one; where the Gnostic teaching said that man can know nothing about the true God, Praxeas ended up arguing that we can know *everything* about God, that he may be completely grasped by the human mind. Faced with the Gnostic denial of the deity of Christ, he ended up by making Christ all that God is, and so teaching that the Father died on the cross, thus earning Modalism another name, Patripassianism, the teaching that the Father suffered. The Bible's teaching may be compared to a road with deep ditches on either side, and one may fall into either ditch unless one holds to the teaching of the Scriptures, and all of that teaching.

It was however Sabellius, a teacher of Libyan origin of whose life very little is known, who was to give his name to the heresy. Active in Rome during the Episcopates of Zephyrinus (198-217) and Callistus I (217-22), he insisted on a strict Unitarian view of the Godhead, one person with three names. The three names, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are, Sabellius taught, merely three modes of revelation; like an actor in the ancient theatre, the one person of God puts on three different masks in his dealings with man. A common Modalist term is 'manifestations'; the idea being that God manifests himself as Father, Son, and Spirit, but that he is simply showing himself in a different way. Bishop Zephyrinus, who is counted by today's Roman Catholics as one of the Popes, so far from opposing Sabellius, welcomed him!

At the time of Sabellius' arrival in Rome, Zephyrinus, by all accounts a rather simple man with little in the way of formal education was engaged in a controversy against Adoptianists, those who taught that Jesus was a man who was 'adopted' as the Son of God at his baptism. The arguments rather unsettled Zephyrinus, and Sabellius, with his insistence that Jesus truly was God, seemed to offer a perfect way of answering the Adoptianists. The Roman Church was in a divided state at the time, and it is one of the ironies of history that it was Hippolytus, the leader of a schismatic group in Rome at the time, who correctly identified Sabellius as a heretic and his teaching as false, and not the man who modern Roman Catholics regard as the guardian of true doctrine! While Callistus I initially went the same way as his predecessor, Hippolytus persuaded him to abandon Sabellius and his teaching; the Bishop of Rome was recovered from error by a schismatic! The schism was eventually healed, and Hippolytus is regarded today in Rome as a

defender of the faith – against, it must be noted, one of Rome’s own popes!

In an attempt to answer to his critics, Sabellius sought to refute the charge of Patripassianism by distinguishing the humanity of Christ from the deity to such an extent that the two are practically two persons, and then stating that the divine Father ‘sympathized’ with the suffering human Son, but did not suffer himself. This is important to note, because modern-day Sabellians who belong to what is called ‘Oneness Pentecostalism’ will deny that they are Modalists because they teach that the Son is the human nature. In fact they are in full agreement with Sabellius. It will be seen that in doing so, he actually gave up one of the points on which he had insisted, namely the full deity of the Son and the reality of the Incarnation. If the man Jesus had an independent thought life from the Divine Christ, then in what way can we truly say that the Son is God? We cannot, at best he is a man in whom God temporarily took up some sort of residence. The unipersonality of God is asserted, and the reality of the Incarnation is denied; ultimately in order to deny that the Father died on the cross, Sabellius denied that one who was God was actually crucified!

Having dealt with, to his own satisfaction at least, the question of the Father and the Son, Sabellius moved on to the Spirit. That he felt the need to do so shows the basic Trinitarian faith of the ancient churches with which he had to deal; had they not believed in the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit, he would have not needed to address that question, but he did. After the Ascension, according to Sabellius, this one divine person came to the Church as the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and it is as the Spirit that he reveals himself to us today. The time will eventually come when this mode of revelation is also unnecessary, and God will return to just being God, as he was to begin with, without any other name. The revelations of Father and Son therefore, to Sabellius, belonged to the past, and the Church now was the Church of the Spirit, and after the end of the age, there would just be God, who would be neither Father, Son, nor Spirit. His teaching was rightly condemned by the Church, which understood that it strikes at the very foundations of Christianity.

The attraction of Sabellianism was that it provided a readily understood model of the Godhead; as a result, Modalism continues to be a problem in the Church. The most influential form of Modalism today is that associated with

the so-called Oneness or 'Jesus Only' Pentecostal churches, the largest of which is the United Pentecostal Church. This is a peculiarly Pentecostal form of Modalism that had its beginnings at a camp meeting near Los Angeles in 1913, when R.A. McAlister preached a sermon in which he said that Baptism was to be in the name of Jesus, not the Triune name. John Scheppe, another Pentecostal preacher, was affected by the message, and had what he interpreted as a mystical divine revelation that led him to reject the Trinity for a Modalist view of God.<sup>[1]</sup> The idea spread among the Assemblies of God churches in particular, and those teaching it were expelled from that denomination in 1916 when the General Council Meeting adopted a strong Trinitarian stance in opposition to Oneness groups. Even though expelled from the Pentecostal mainstream, Oneness Pentecostalism continues to thrive, and some estimate that as many as one quarter of American Pentecostals are members of Modalist churches.

Not only are there those groups who are formally Sabellian in its doctrine of God, but there are those conservative Christians who slip into a naïve form of Sabellianism, insisting on the deity of Christ, yet unable to formulate a meaningful doctrine of the Trinity; but then it must be emphasized that Modalism began as a naïve error. Many ministers are amazed to hear church members, even deacons, in prayer meetings beginning by addressing the Father, and then thanking him for dying on the cross! Not that such people actually are Modalists, but the language clearly suggests confusion. We recall a young man, an evangelical, considering ordination in the Church of England, expressing the idea that the Trinity was a temporary thing, and that God would eventually 'return' to being unipersonal. An understanding of why Modalism is false is therefore of great importance.

### **The Error**

Modalists frequently urge that their understanding of the Trinity is the 'straightforward' way to read the texts, but in reality the reply on an initial error which colors their understanding of Scripture. Put simply, the root error of the Modalists is in the insistence that the Divine nature must be basically comprehensible to man's reason. They begin, in other words, with a presupposition that is left unspoken, the assumption of Unitarianism, which in this case amounts to the logical fallacy of begging the question; assuming the very point that is in fact to be proven.

As a result of this initial error, the Biblical revelation, that the one God exists eternally in three persons, is of necessity discarded in favor of the teaching that God is unipersonal; what is usually referred to as Unitarianism (although orthodox Trinitarianism insists just as much on the unity of God as those who claim for themselves the title of ‘Unitarian’). What is really at issue is the nature, not the fact, of the Divine unity.

Overreacting to the Gnostic insistence on the complete ‘otherness’ of God, the Modalists end with a God who is completely comprehensible by man – and therefore actually less than man. There is an old French proverb, ‘*Le dieu define est le dieu finie*,’ ‘The god who is understood is the god who is dead,’ and the proverb applies fully to the Sabellian view of God. There is in fact nothing mysterious about the Sabellian deity, and quite unlike the God of the Bible, his thoughts are as our thoughts, and his ways like our ways. We do not need the Bible to tell us what he is like, since he is like us. In contrast, B. B. Warfield notes that, ‘The doctrine of the Trinity is purely a revealed doctrine. That is to say, it embodies a truth which has never been discovered, and is undiscoverable, by natural reason. With all his searching, man has never been able to find out for himself the deepest things of God.<sup>[2]</sup>’ Sabellianism, as a species of rationalism, needs must deny that, and therefore fails to do justice to the whole of the Biblical revelation.

That is not to say that they do not attempt to appeal to the Bible to support their errors. It has been said that ‘every heretic has his text,’ and the Modalists are no exception. They appealed to such texts as John 10:30, in which Jesus says, ‘I and my Father are one,’ and John 14:9, in which he says, ‘he that hath seen me hath seen the Father.’ Yet while every heretic has his texts, he does not really possess them, but is guilty of taking them; the orthodox have the whole Bible. Yes, assuming Unitarianism, John 10:30 and 14:9 can be read as saying that the Father and the Son are the same person in different modes, but that is only possible when they are being read in isolation, out of context, and apart from the fullness of Biblical revelation. If, however, we allow the whole Bible to speak, we will not fall into such error. The fallacy of assuming Unitarianism is not only found among the Modalists; all groups who deny the Trinity commonly engage in it.

Modalists make a great deal out of texts that speak of the uniqueness of God; for example, Noetus of Smyrna, who taught Modalism in the late second

century, cited as his proof-texts Exodus 3:6, 'I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,' and Exodus 20:3, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me.' To which the orthodox reply that we are not tritheists, we believe in one God, not three separate ones. Again Noetus raised Isaiah 43:11, 'I, *even* I, am the Lord; and beside me there is no saviour,' with the same underlying error. But Modalists, and indeed anyone else assuming Unitarianism, whether Muslim or Jehovah's Witness, constantly fall into this error, of arguing for monotheism as if it were an argument against the Trinity.

In arguing against the Trinity, the Modalist comes up against insuperable problems when confronted with the reality of the New Testament. How can he possibly deal with the prayers of Jesus? Were they an act, a pretence? This has rightly been rejected by the vast majority of historical Modalists, but then what were they? Sabellius and others after him have sought to answer the question by saying that the human Jesus was praying to the divine nature, but then the idea of the identity of the Father and the Son must be abandoned, and they are left with two separate (as well as distinct) persons, a man and God, cooperating, which is of course to completely abandon in any meaningful sense the deity of Christ, and to leave us with a man who cooperated with God who in some sense indwelt him. While the Modalist denies this, the fact remains that such teaching is a denial of all that is meant by the term 'Incarnation.'

And then there is the *content* of Christ's prayers. In John 17:5, our Lord prays, 'And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.' This is an insuperable problem for the Modalist, for the naïve Modalist who wants to say that the Father and the Son are the same person is faced with the Son praying to the Father, and the more sophisticated Sabellian finds himself faced with the human person, whom he believes came into existence in time, talking about 'the glory which I had with thee before the world was,' when the Sabellian does not believe he even existed before the world was. This cannot be answered, the evasions adopted by Oneness Pentecostal theologians are just that; they are evasions, they are not answers.

The Baptism of Jesus is also a text that is fraught with difficulty for the Modalist. Mark 1:9-11 records, 'And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus

came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him: and there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’ To the orthodox Trinitarian teaching, there is no issue at all here; we have simply the revelation of the Trinity. But the Modalist must deny that we have here a revelation of the Trinity, in spite of the plain reading of the text.

The Cross has long been recognized as the greatest weakness of the Modalists, hence their old name of Patripassians, those who teach that the Father suffered. What happened at the cross? In Hebrews 9:14, the Bible speaks of, ‘the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God.’ To the Modalist, this is impossible language – yet it is the language of the Bible. The Bible uniformly presents Christ’s death as an offering to the Father, but Modalism insists that the Father and the Son are the same person. All attempts to explain the cross in terms of a distinction between a divine Father indwelling a human Son end by reducing the cross to the death of a merely human person, and not the self-offering of the Lord of Glory.

Modalism also has issues with the Bible’s portrayal of the economy of grace today; according to Modalism, after the Ascension, the one divine person became the Holy Spirit, and it is as the Spirit that he continues to exist, and relates to us. As the Son, he has ceased to exist. Yet the Bible is quite clear that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is *eternal*. In 1 John 2:1, John says, ‘And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.’ That simply cannot be so if we do not relate to God as Father, and if we do not relate to God as Son any more either. The book of Hebrews is even more emphatic, saying of Christ, ‘He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them,’ (Hebrews 7:25). Rather than giving the ‘plain sense’ of Scripture, as soon as the Modalist is forced outside the very narrow selection of texts that he abuses to support his heresy, he is forced to twist and mangle the Bible.

So we see that while Modalists falsely claim that their teaching is the ‘plain meaning’ of the Scriptures, in actual fact nothing could be further from the truth; while Modalists rip passages out of context and then claim the ‘plain meaning’, at the same time they take, for example, Christ’s prayers, and say



that, contrary to the plain meaning of the text, that you have a Divine Son speaking to a Divine Father, it is in fact something else, either a charade, or a human person indwelt by a divine person praying to that divine person indwelling him, an idea that is not taught in the Bible, but has been invented in a vain attempt to defend a false doctrine. Again, the Bible speaks of the Father ‘sending’ the Son and the Spirit, but the Modalists insist that in fact this means he *became*, successively, the Son and the Spirit. We are left with the inescapable conclusion that far from the Bible being taken in its plain meaning, words are being twisted to fit them into a rationalist philosophical position.

### THE BIBLICAL ANSWER

Most heresy begins with the distortion of truth, not the outright denial of it, and Modalists, like most heretics, began with something true; the unity of God. Where they go wrong is in the insistence that that unity must needs be unipersonal. Yes, God is one. Isaiah 43:10 states clearly,

*‘Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord,  
and my servant whom I have chosen:  
that ye may know and believe me,  
and understand that I am he:  
before me there was no God formed,  
neither shall there be after me.’*

But in the debate at hand, that is not the issue, it is the nature of the Divine unity that is the issue. Where Modalism errs is in assuming that the Divine unity must be also undifferentiated; this by no means necessarily follows. The result of this is that most of the proof-texts produced by Modalists to substantiate their doctrines are either simply affirmations of monotheism, or affirmations of the deity of Christ; many Modalists imagine that their work is done if they merely point out these doctrines which no orthodox Christian denies.

Jesus is indeed God; John 10:30, ‘I and the Father are one’ is indeed in the Bible. The question that must be asked of that text is, in what sense are the Father and the Son one? The Modalist assumes it means ‘one person’, since he assumes Unitarianism, but this is by no means a necessary reading of the text, and one that in fact requires the text to read ‘I am the Father,’ which of course is not what it says. In John 14:9, Christ does indeed say, ‘he that hath seen me hath seen the Father,’ but this does not mean that he is the Father. In

fact, just a few verses earlier, answering Thomas, Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him,' (John 14:6-7); he expressly distinguishes himself from the Father. The Modalist must either tie himself in knots by trying to say that in 6-7 it is the *human* Jesus speaking, but in 9 the divine Christ, or admit the truth that his theory is quite impossible to sustain, and that the words of Scripture are of greater authority than human reason.

There is in fact no way at all in which the New Testament can be understood from a Modalistic perspective. The whole of John 17, in which our Lord prays, 'And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was,' (John 17:5) is impossible on the Sabellian hypothesis. The one divine person cannot be praying to himself, and the human Jesus did not have glory with God before the world was; here the Modalist is caught and revealed to be a rationalist. In John 14:12, Jesus says, 'I go unto my Father,' impossible if he is the Father. Nor is Jesus the Holy Spirit, for he says of the Spirit, 'And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter,' note that *another*; a distinct person, *not* the Son. In John 15:26, Christ says, 'But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me,' distinguishing Father, Son, and Spirit. John 6:38, 'For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me,' is quite impossible for the Modalist to interpret at all. Was the man Jesus in heaven? No, God was in heaven. But who then sent him? John 3:16 says, 'God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son...' it does not say 'that he became the Son. We could go on; the hermeneutical gymnastics that Modalists must engage in over such texts are startling, and would be humorous were the matter not one of such importance. But it is of great importance, and so it is a tragedy to see untaught and unstable men thus wrest the Scriptures to their own, inevitable, destruction.

On the other hand, if we take the text as it stands, and allow the Bible to speak to us rather than imposing upon it our own ideas, we find that it is a harmonious whole. True, we cannot fully comprehend God, but it is a very arrogant creature who imagines that he, finite as he is, can completely understand his infinite creator. As Hart puts it,

*‘To comprehend the great THREE-ONE,  
Is more than highest angels can,’*

Of course God is greater than we are, and when he speaks to us, it is our place as his creatures to listen, to receive, and to believe what he says. Just because we cannot fully comprehend the Biblical data is no reason to reject it.

And yet, while we cannot comprehend God, the Christian *experiences* the Trinity, ‘And truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ’ (1 John 2:1). ‘If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him’ (John 14:23). The Christian *experiences* God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In prayer, we pray to the Father, *through* the Son, *by* the Spirit. And ultimately it was this, not mere theological discussion, that defeated the Modalists, the conviction of Christians taught by the Holy Spirit that Christ is truly distinct from the Father, and that the events of salvation-history are not a charade, but real. What theologians debated, ordinary believers knew. John Owen, that great heavyweight of the Puritans, wrote a whole book on *Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*; readers are directed to this book, with all its learning and warmth, as one of the best indirect refutations of error ever written.

The ultimate root of the doctrine of the Trinity is in the experience of the Church, not merely in its Confessions, and this experience is recorded, by divine inspiration, in the Scriptures. The Apostles experienced God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and not as one person wearing three masks, but three persons who are yet one God. The fact of the matter is that the Trinity is not, contrary to common accusations, a doctrine of philosophical speculation; it is all anti-Trinitarian doctrines that are speculation. No, the doctrine of the Trinity is merely a statement, a summary, of the Biblical revelation about God, who is greater than we are and higher than our understanding. And yet we, by the Holy Spirit, know God, and have communion with him, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God in three persons, and three persons in one God.

## CONCLUSION

We must always beware of mere partial truth being passed off as the whole truth; this is the most common form in which error and heresy comes, not as the outright denial of all truth, but the distortion of truth, emphasizing one

truth to the denial of another. The Sabellian heresy was a classic example of this, and its current forms prove that this continues to this day. We learn from the Sabellian heresy the importance of confessing the whole of the Bible's teaching, and not subjecting that teaching to human reason as if our reason were above Scripture. We must submit to the Scriptures, not to force them into our rationalist strait jackets.

Christ is God; this is a basic fact of the Christian revelation that is constantly under attack, but it is also capable of distortion if Unitarianism is assumed, with the consequence that it is insisted that Christ is all that God is. The Incarnation is real, and while it had a beginning, it never has an end, this too is a basic truth of Christianity.

Christ is God, but he is not the Father, nor is he the Spirit. The Trinity is not just an appearance, but reality; God does not deceive us in the Bible, he reveals himself to us as he is. We may not know God perfectly, since he is infinite, but we are not, but we can know him truly. It is this that, ultimately, Modalism strikes at, since it ends up saying that what the New Testament reveals about God is merely an appearance, nothing more. Our Christian experience is not a lie, a trick that God plays on us like Peter Sellers playing multiple roles in *Doctor Strangelove* by means of make-up, but it is true.

Just as most heresies begin with muddled thinking concerning Biblical teaching, so they depend on such thinking for their propagation. Modalism depends on muddled thinking for much of its appeal, and so long as people's thinking remains muddled, they will find it hard to tell the difference between heresy and orthodoxy. The Sabellian controversy teaches us that we must think clearly and Biblically, and we must not abandon either. The Bible, and the *whole* Bible must guide our thoughts. That Bible leaves no way in which we can deny the Trinity and in fact be faithful to its teaching as to who God is. If we cannot grasp it all with our minds, let us remember that God is greater than we are.

*Where reason fails, with all her powers,  
There faith prevails, and love adores.*

-Isaac Watts

## Notes:

[1] Information from J. Ankerberg and J. Weldon, *Encyclopedia of cults and New Religions* (Eugene, OR, Harvest House, 1999)

[2] *Biblical Doctrines* (Repr. Grand Rapids, Baker, 2000), page 133

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