

Heresies: Modalism

DOGMA & THEOLOGY

Modalism is one of the oldest distortions of the Christian confession of God, and it has never fully gone away. Under various names — Sabellianism, Modalistic Monarchianism, and, in our own time, Oneness Pentecostalism and certain popularizations of Unitarianism — it denies that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three distinct Persons, reducing Them instead to three modes, masks, or roles played successively by a single divine Person. The Church has rejected this teaching since the third century because it undoes the Gospel at its root. If the Father is not a Person distinct from the Son, then the Son was not really sent, did not really pray to the Father, did not really offer Himself to the Father on the Cross, and does not really reign at the Father's right hand. Pre-servants need to know this heresy by name, recognize it in its modern forms, and be able to reply from the Scriptures and the Fathers. This lesson traces modalism to its source in Sabellius, sets out the Church's rebuttal, and walks the servant through the iconographic and patristic witness to the Holy Trinity, concluding with a pastoral note on why this doctrine matters for ordinary Christian life.

What Modalism Teaches

Modalism, sometimes called Modalistic Monarchianism, is the teaching that God is a single Person who has revealed Himself under three different modes — as Father in creation, as Son in redemption, and as Holy Spirit in sanctification. In this view, the Trinitarian names are temporary costumes worn by one actor. The Son and the Spirit are not eternal Persons; they are roles that appear in history and then fold back into the undifferentiated unity from which they came.

The instinct behind modalism is a sincere one: to protect the oneness of God but compromises the fullness of truth. The Scriptures are emphatic that the Lord our God is one (Deuteronomy 6:4). Early Christians who came into the Gospel from strict monotheism wrestled with how to confess three divine Persons without slipping into tritheism. Modalism seemed, to some, to solve the puzzle by identifying the three Persons with one another. The solution, however, violates the very Scriptures it claims to honor. The Father who speaks from heaven at the Baptism of Christ (Matthew 3:17), the Son who is baptized in the Jordan, and the Spirit descending as a dove are not one Person changing costumes. They are three Persons manifest at the same moment.

The modalist temptation is still with us. In our time it appears in popular preaching that speaks of God "wearing different hats," in sermons that compare the Trinity to ice, water, and steam (three modes of H₂O), and in the Oneness Pentecostal movement that rebaptizes converts "in Jesus' name only" on the explicit claim that Father, Son, and Spirit are titles of a single Person. Pre-servants must be able to name this error in its plain and modern clothing.

Sabellius and the Origin of the Error

The name associated most closely with modalism is Sabellius, a third-century priest whose teaching spread across the Pentapolis — the region of five cities in what is now eastern Libya. Most of what Sabellius actually wrote has been lost; we know his doctrine largely through the responses of those who refuted him, among them Dionysius of Alexandria, Dionysius of Rome, Tertullian of Carthage, and Hippolytus of Rome. From these witnesses the shape of his teaching is clear.

Sabellius taught that God is single and indivisible, and that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three modes of one divine Person. On his scheme, the One God successively revealed Himself to humanity — as the Father in the age of Creation, as the Son in the age of Redemption, and as the Spirit in the ongoing age of Sanctification and Regeneration. The three names describe sequential phases of divine activity, not eternal distinctions within God.

Dionysius of Rome wrote against this teaching with unusual directness: "Sabellius... blasphemes in saying that the Son Himself is the Father and vice versa." The charge is not that Sabellius held a small error. It is that he denies the relational life of God revealed in the Gospel.

Unitarianism and the Modern Return of the Error

The Reformation, in its more radical currents, produced Unitarianism — a movement that, while not identical to ancient Sabellianism, rests on the same refusal of Trinitarian distinction. Unitarianism emerged first in Eastern Europe in the sixteenth century and spread to Britain, North America, and beyond. It shares the modalist insistence on God's oneness at the expense of the Persons, and differs chiefly in the degree to which it denies the divinity of Christ altogether.

In our day, the modalist instinct reappears in several places: in the Oneness Pentecostal churches that regard themselves as apostolic precisely by denying the Trinity; in academic voices that present the Trinity as a belated philosophical imposition on a simpler biblical message; and in casual preaching that collapses the three Persons into three job descriptions. The servant should be alert to these forms and able to answer them patiently.

The answer is not, in the first instance, philosophical. It is biblical. Wherever the Scriptures speak of the Father sending the Son, the Son praying to the Father, or the Spirit proceeding from the Father — that is, on nearly every page of the New Testament — the modalist scheme collapses.

The Scriptural Witness to Three Persons

The Lord's own baptism is the fullest and clearest testimony to the three Persons at a single moment in history:

"When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'" (Matthew 3:16-17).

The Father speaks from heaven, the Son stands in the river, and the Spirit rests upon Him. Three Persons, one God — at one moment and in one act.

The Lord Himself teaches the distinction of Persons. He prays to His Father ("Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit," Luke 23:46). He speaks of being sent ("As the Father has sent Me, I also send you," John 20:21). He promises to send the Holy Spirit ("the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name," John 14:26). He commissions His disciples to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19) — a formula that Tertullian already invoked against modalism. Tertullian's reminder is as pointed today as it was in the third century: "Jesus commands them to baptize into the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — not into a unipersonal God."

Additional witnesses are abundant. In John 1:1 the Word is "with God" and "was God" — two truths that modalism cannot hold together. In John 17 the Son prays to the Father in words that would be incoherent if He were merely speaking to Himself under another name. In the apostolic benediction, the Apostle blesses the Church in the name of the three Persons: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14). Modalism is not a minor dispute about vocabulary. It is a denial of the God revealed on nearly every page of the New Testament.

Why the Trinitarian Baptism Matters

One of the sharpest places at which modalism is tested is the sacrament of baptism. St. Dionysius of Alexandria offered a striking pastoral rule:

"Those baptized in the name of three Persons... though baptized by heretics, shall not be rebaptized. But those converted from other heresies shall be perfected by the baptism of the Holy Church."

The implication is that the Trinitarian formula is not decorative; it is the very content that makes baptism valid. A baptism administered outside the Church, if performed with water and with the three-Personal name, is at least formally Trinitarian and is not simply void. A baptism administered with a non-Trinitarian formula is a different matter altogether.

This is why the Oneness movements, which explicitly reject the three Persons and baptize "in Jesus' name only," are treated by the Orthodox Church as outside the pale. It is not a quibble about words. The name under which we are baptized is the name of the God into whom we are baptized. To be baptized into a modalist God is to be baptized into a God who does not exist.

The servant will sometimes meet Christians who have been baptized in such traditions. The pastoral response is careful: to receive them into the Church through the ordinary sacramental means the Church prescribes, to explain what was missing in the formula they received, and to rejoice with them in the full Trinitarian grace given in Orthodox baptism.

The Icon of Theophany

The Church has long confessed the Trinity in her iconography as well as in her theology. The icon of the Theophany — the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan — is a direct visual reply to modalism. In it, the Father is represented by a hand or a heavenly voice from above, the Son stands in the river, and the

Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove. Three distinct Persons are shown at one historical moment, and the viewer is taught by the image what the modalist tries to deny.

The New Testament Epistles echo this confession. "Who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person" (Hebrews 1:3). "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Colossians 1:15). "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2:9). These verses teach the full deity of the Son, His distinctness from the Father, and His perfect unity with Him — exactly the Trinitarian confession that Sabellius denied.

The servant can point a catechumen to the Theophany icon with simple words: here is the Father's voice, the Son's body, the Spirit's descent. One event, three Persons. This is the faith into which you are baptized.

The Hospitality of Abraham

Perhaps the most celebrated Trinitarian icon in the Orthodox world is the Hospitality of Abraham, painted in its most famous form by St. Andrei Rublev in the fifteenth century. It depicts the scene in Genesis 18 in which Abraham welcomes three strangers to his tent and addresses them as "Lord." The Fathers have read that passage as a veiled theophany of the Trinity — Abraham's three guests as the three divine Persons, seated in unity and quiet attention around a single table.

The icon preaches the Trinity to the eye. Three figures share one bodily aspect, one posture, one divine identity, while remaining irreducibly three. They are not interchangeable modes of a single figure. They are three Persons, each turned toward the others in perfect communion. This is the visual rebuttal of Sabellius.

Pastorally, the icon also teaches hospitality. The Persons of the Trinity are shown welcoming Abraham's welcome. The Christian family gathered around its own table, the Church gathered around the Eucharistic table, is invited into the communion of the three Persons. Modalism has nothing to offer this table; there is no communion among modes.

The Trinity in the Orthodox Fathers

The Fathers spoke of the Trinity with care and with reverence for the mystery. St. Basil the Great insists that the oneness of God is not mathematical: "We do not count by addition, passing from the one to the many by increase; we do not say: one, two, three, or first, second and third." The three Persons are not a tally; they are the eternal life of the one God.

St. Basil also describes the economy of the divine acts in words that both preserve the Persons and insist on their unity: "Every divine action begins from the Father, proceeds through the Son, and is completed in the Holy Spirit." The acts are one act, because the God who acts is one; the Persons in that act are three, because the three Persons remain.

St. Athanasius the Apostolic — whose defense of Christ against Arius also guarded the whole Trinitarian confession — writes in the same key: "The Father plans and gives commands, the Son

performs and creates, while the Spirit nourishes and increases, and by degrees, man ascends toward the Perfect One." Once more: three Persons, one work.

St. Basil offers a striking image of the interconnection: "Just as he who grasps one end of a chain also pulls along with it the other end to himself, so he who draws the Spirit, through the Spirit draws both the Son and the Father along with it." To know any of the three Persons truly is to know the others, because the three are of one essence, one will, one love.

These witnesses are not dispensable. The servant who tries to speak of God without them risks falling, in one generation or the next, back into the error of Sabellius.

Why the Trinity Is a Cross for Human Thought

Orthodox teaching has always recognized that the Holy Trinity cannot be captured by analogy, reduced to logic, or packaged in illustration. St. Basil calls it a "cross for human ways of thought." This is not obscurantism; it is honesty. The doctrine is given by revelation, not by speculation, and it exceeds our measuring.

This is why every attempted illustration eventually fails. The familiar comparison of the Trinity to water, ice, and steam is a modalist illustration: H₂O in three states. The comparison to a man who is simultaneously a son, a husband, and a father is also modalist: one Person in three roles. The analogy of the shamrock — one clover with three leaves — slides toward tritheism, as do most attempts at three distinct physical parts. All such comparisons eventually shipwreck on one shore or another. The Fathers counsel silence at that point, and worship rather than diagram.

This silence is itself instructive. The Holy Trinity is not a puzzle to be solved but a communion into which to be drawn. Baptism, Eucharist, prayer, almsgiving, and the life of the Church are how the pre-servant enters that communion. Theology serves the entrance; it does not replace it.

Pastoral Implications: Why This Error Matters

A Christian who accepts modalism, whether consciously or by drift, loses several things at once. He loses the real sending of the Son: if the Father is not another Person, then there is no real sender and no real sent One — only a self-sent self. He loses the real Cross: the Son does not really offer Himself to the Father, because there is no Father to offer to. He loses the real prayer of Christ: all the hours Jesus spent in communion with His Father dissolve into a self-talk that mocks the Gospels.

He also loses the Christian life. The Christian is baptized into the three Persons, prays to the Father through the Son in the Spirit, and is fashioned by the Spirit into the likeness of the Son to the glory of the Father. Strip out the three Persons, and this whole pattern of devotion collapses. What remains is moral philosophy with a religious label.

Finally, he loses the communion of love that the Gospel puts at the center of reality. "God is love" (1 John 4:8) is only intelligible if God is three; otherwise there is no eternal Lover, Beloved, and the Love between them. Modalism renders the deepest sentence of the New Testament a figure of speech. Orthodox Trinitarianism keeps it a reality.

For these reasons the Church labors, generation after generation, to hand down the Trinity whole. The servant carries that labor forward. He learns the doctrine, tests modern phrasings against it, treasures the icons that teach it, and loves the God who is revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — not under three masks, but in three Persons, one in essence, worshiped and glorified together, now and forever.



Review Questions

1. What is sabellianism? (A: Sabellianism is the belief that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three different modes or aspects of God.)
2. What is the dogma of the Trinity? (A: The dogma of the Trinity is a cross for human ways of thought.)
3. Philosophical speculation has succeeded in rising to the mystery of the Holy Trinity. True or False? (A: False)
4. What does the Trinitarian view state? (A: The Trinitarian view recognizes the three distinct persons within the Godhead.)
5. What are the two icons used in Eastern orthodox iconography? (A: The Ancient of Days and the Hospitality of Abraham iconographies.)