

Sabellianism

For other uses, see Sabellian (disambiguation).

In Christianity, **Sabellianism** (also known as **modalism**, **modalistic monarchianism**, or **modal monarchism**) is the nontrinitarian belief that the Heavenly Father, Resurrected Son and Holy Spirit are different *modes* or *aspects* of one monadic God, as perceived by *the believer*, rather than three distinct persons within *the Godhead*.

The term Sabellianism comes from Sabellius, a theologian and priest from the 3rd century. Modalism differs from Unitarianism by accepting the Nicean doctrine that Jesus is fully God.

Meaning and origins

Main article: Trinitarianism

God was said to have three "faces" or "masks" (Greek πρόσωπα *prosopa*; Latin *personae*).^[1] Modalists note that the only number ascribed to God in the Holy Bible is *One* and that there is no inherent threeness ascribed to God explicitly in scripture.^[2] The number three is never mentioned in relation to God in scripture, which of course is the number that is central to the word "Trinity". The only possible exceptions to this are the Great Commission Matthew 28:16-20, 2 Corinthians 13:14, and the Comma Johanneum, which many regard as a spurious text passage in First John (1 John 5:7) known primarily from the King James Version and some versions of the Textus Receptus but not included in modern critical texts.^[3] It is also suspected that Matthew 28:19 is not part of the original text, because Eusebius of Caesarea quoted it by saying "In my name", and there is no mention of baptism in the verse. Eusebius only quoted the trinitarian formula after the Council of Nicea (Conybeare (*Hibbert Journal* i (1902-3), page 102). The *Shem-Tob's Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* (George Howard) also has no reference of baptism or a trinitarian formula in Matthew 28:19. Trinitarians believe that all three members of the Trinity were present as seemingly distinct persons at Jesus' baptism, and believe there is other scriptural evidence for Trinitarianism (see main page for details). Modalism has been mainly associated with Sabellius, who taught a form of it in Rome in the 3rd century. This had come to him via the teachings of Noetus and Praxeas.^[4]

Hippolytus of Rome knew Sabellius personally and mentioned him in the *Philosophumena*. He knew Sabellius disliked Trinitarian theology, yet he called Modal Monarchism the heresy of Noetus, not that of Sabellius. Sabellianism was embraced by Christians in Cyrenaica, to whom Demetrius, Patriarch of Alexandria, wrote letters arguing against this belief.

Modalism teaches that the Heavenly Father, Resurrected Son and Holy Spirit identified by the Trinity Doctrine are different *modes* or *aspects* of the One God, as perceived by *the believer*, rather than *three coeternal persons* within *the Godhead*. In passages of scripture such as Matthew 1:16-17^[5] where the Son, Father, and Holy Spirit are separated in the text, they view this phenomenon as confirming God's omnipresence, and His ability to manifest himself as he pleases. Oneness Pentecostals and Modalists dispute the traditional Trinitarian doctrine, while affirming the Christian doctrine of God taking on flesh as Jesus Christ. Like Trinitarians, Oneness adherents believe that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. However, whereas Trinitarians believe that "God the Son", the eternal second person of the Trinity, became man, Oneness adherents hold that the one and only true God—who manifests himself in any way he chooses, including as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—became man. Oneness Pentecostals and other modalists are regarded by Catholic, Orthodox, and some other mainstream Christians as heretical for rejecting the Trinity Doctrine, which they regard as equivalent to Unitarianism. Modalists differentiate themselves from Unitarians by affirming Christ's Deity. Oneness teaches that there is only one being, revealing himself in different ways.^[6] Modalists cite passages in the New Testament that refer to God in the singular, and note the lack of the word "Trinity" in any canonical scripture. They claim that Colossians 1:15-20^[7] refers to Christ's relationship with the Father in a similar sense:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 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. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 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. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.^[8]

They also cite Christ's response to Philip's query on who the Father was in John 14:10^[9]:

Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

A notable modern adherent of Modalism is T.D. Jakes.

Catholic criticism

Catholics charge that modalistic monarchianism has its origin by means of influence in Greek pagan philosophy, including pagan philosophers like Euclid and Aristotle,^[10] Wikipedia:Verifiability who based their logic on Monism and Aristotle's arguments around his concept *energeia* (i.e. energy) called metaphysics.^[11] As the concept that ontology (also generally referred to as metaphysics) can be reduced to either a single detectable substance (called substance theory) and or a single being (the concept of the Absolute). Aristotelian logic is the way ontologically or via metaphysics that Hellenic pagan philosopher Aristotle reasoned (Aquinas analytically, Zeno, Plato and Socrates dialectically, Aristotle syllogistically) to deconstructed human consciousness and existence and being. In order to represent their view of the monad or single-ness (unity of all things). As unity or oneness in the "idea" of God and God's *ousia* as the essence or universal category above finite being.^[12]

Ancient opposition

The chief critic of Sabellianism was Tertullian, who labeled the movement "Patripassianism", from the Latin words *pater* for "father", and *passus* from the verb "to suffer" because it implied that the Father suffered on the Cross. It was coined by Tertullian in his work *Adversus Praxeas*, Chapter I, "By this Praxeas did a twofold service for the devil at Rome: he drove away prophecy, and he brought in heresy; he put to flight the Paraclete, and he crucified the Father."

It is important to note that our only sources extant for our understanding of Sabellianism are from their detractors. Scholars today are not in agreement as to what exactly Sabellius or Praxeas taught. It is easy to suppose Tertullian and Hippolytus misrepresented the opinions of their opponents.^[13]

Tertullian seems to suggest that the majority of believers at that time favoured the Sabellian view of the oneness of God.^[14] Epiphanius (*Haeres* 62) about 375 notes that the adherents of Sabellius were still to be found in great numbers, both in Mesopotamia and at Rome.^[15] The first general council at Constantinople in 381 in canon VII and the third general council at Constantinople in 680 in canon XCV declared the baptism of Sabellius to be invalid, which indicates that Sabellianism was still extant.

Historic Sabellianism taught that God the Father was the only true existence of the Godhead, a belief known as Monarchianism. One author has described Sabellius' teaching thus: *The true question, therefore, turns on this, viz., what is it which constitutes what we name 'person' in the Godhead? Is it original, substantial, essential to divinity itself? Or does it belong to and arise from the exhibitions and developments which the divine Being has made of himself to his creatures? The former Sabellius denied; the latter he fully admitted.*

It has been noted that the Greek term "homoousian" or "con-substantial", which Athanasius of Alexandria favoured, was actually a term reported to be put forth by Sabellius, and was a term that many followers of Athanasius were uneasy about. Their objection to the term "homoousian" was that it was considered to be un-Scriptural, suspicious,

and "of a Sabellian tendency."^[16] This was because Sabellius also considered the Father and the Son to be "one substance." Meaning that, to Sabellius, the Father and Son were one essential person, though operating as different manifestations or faces.

Sabellianism has been rejected by the majority of Christian churches in favour of Trinitarianism, which was eventually defined as three distinct, co-equal, co-eternal persons by the Athanasian Creed late in the 4th century.^[17]

Eastern Orthodox view

The Greek Orthodox teach that God is not of a substance that is comprehensible since God the Father has no origin and is eternal and infinite. That it is improper to speak of things as physical and metaphysical but rather it is Christian to speak of things as created and uncreated. God the Father is the origin, source of the Trinity not God in substance or essence.^[18] Therefore the consciousness of God is not obtainable to created beings either in this life or the next (see apophatism), though through co-operation with God (called theosis) Mankind can become good (God-like) and from such a perspective reconcile himself to the Knowledge of Good and the Knowledge of Evil he consumed in the Garden of Eden (see the Fall of Man). Thus returning himself to the proper relationship with his creator and source of being.

Later teachings

Oneness Pentecostalism teaches that God is one Person, and that the Father (a spirit) is united with Jesus (a man) as the Son of God. However, Oneness Pentecostalism differs somewhat by rejecting sequential modalism, and by the full acceptance of the begotten humanity of the Son, not eternally begotten, who was the man Jesus and was born, crucified, and risen, and not the deity. This directly opposes Patripassianism and the pre-existence of the Son, which Sabellianism does not.

Oneness Pentecostals believe that Jesus was "Son" only when he became flesh on earth, but was the Father before being made man. They refer to the Father as the "Spirit" and the Son as the "Flesh". But they believe that Jesus and the Father are one essential Person. Though operating as different "manifestations" or "modes". Oneness Pentecostals reject the Trinity doctrine, viewing it as pagan and un-Scriptural, and hold to the Jesus' Name doctrine with respect to baptisms. They are often referred to as "Modalists" or "Sabellians" or "Jesus Only". Oneness Pentecostalism can be compared to Sabellianism, or can be described as holding to a form of Sabellianism, as both are Nontrinitarian, and as both believe that Jesus was "Almighty God in the Flesh", but they do not totally identify each other.

However, it cannot be certain whether Sabellius taught a dispensational Modalism or taught what is known today as Oneness since all we have of his teaching comes through the writing of his enemies. All of his original works were burned. The following excerpts which demonstrate some of the known doctrinal characteristics of ancient Sabellians may be seen to compare with the doctrines in the modern Oneness movement:

Sabellianism was doctrine adhered to by a sect of the Montanists.

- Cyprian wrote of them "How, when God the Father is not known--nay, is even blasphemed--can they who among the heretics are said to be baptized in the name of Christ only, be judged to have obtained the remission of sins?" (Cyprian, c. 250, W, 5.383,484)
- In 225 Hippolytus spoke of them saying "Some of them assent to the heresy of the Noetians, affirming the Father Himself is the Son."
- Victorinus had this to say of them "Some had doubts about the baptism of those who appeared to recognize the same Father with the Son with us, yet who received the new prophets."

Sabellianism was also referred to by the following Church fathers:

- Dionysius (c. 200-265) wrote "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." (St. Dionysius, Letters and Treatises,p.54).
- "Sabellius...blasphemes in saying that the Son Himself is the Father and vice versa." (Dionysius of Rome, c.264,W, 6.365)
- "Jesus commands them to baptize into the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--not into a unipersonal God." (Tertullian, C. 213,W,3.623)

Sabellianism teaching of Modalism and singular name baptism was also accompanied by glossolalia and prophecy among the abovementioned sect of Montanists.

- In 225 Tertullian spoke of "those who would deserve the excellent gifts of the spirit--and who...by means of the Holy Spirit would obtain the gift of language, wisdom, and knowledge."
- It is reported that Sabellians experienced glossolalia and baptized in the "shorter formula" because of their denial of the Trinity. (J.H. Blunt, p.332,Heik,p 150, kelsey, pp. 40,41).

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- [4] *A History of Christianity: Volume I: Beginnings to 1500* by Kenneth S. Latourette, Revised Edition pg 144-146. Published by HarperCollins, 1975: ISBN 0-06-064952-6, ISBN 978-0-06-064952-4 (http://books.google.com/books?id=Q4pzuXCiDdYC&pg=PA144&lpg=PA144&dq=Sabellius+text&source=web&ots=iQo0P9RxOk&sig=jYiQEtbssiYsNExqzB5R_vDA9Y&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=1&ct=result#PPA144,M1)
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- [6] The Oneness of God (<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/pentecostal/One-Top.htm>) by David K. Bernard. Explains the Oneness view of God, as opposed to the Trinitarian viewpoint.
- [7] <http://tools.wmflabs.org/bibleversefinder/?book=Colossians&verse=1:15-20&src=ESV>
- [8] Colossians 1:15-20 (ESV) (<http://www.biblestudytools.com/esv/colossians/passage.aspx?q=colossians+1:15-20>)
- [9] <http://tools.wmflabs.org/bibleversefinder/?book=John&verse=14:10&src=NIV>
- [10] Hippolytus says that they argued on Holy Scripture in syllogistic form. Euclid, Aristotle, and Theophrastus were their admiration, and Galen they even adored. Monarchians New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10448a.htm>)
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External links

- Encyclopaedia Britannica, Sabellianism (<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9064615/Sabellianism>)
 - Modalism vs. Youtube: Trinitarianism Debate (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_FbTOe7wdc&feature=related) debate between reverend David Bernard of New Life UPCI versus reverend Gene Cook of Reformed Baptist Church
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