

CPC Church History I  
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Modalism and Origen

## **Modalism**

### Motivating a Heresy – the Nature of the Problem

Modalism is a doctrine which denies that the distinction between Father, Son and Holy Spirit is a real distinction. Modalists affirmed that we must speak of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but claimed that we must understand these to be different names for the one God. How did they get to this position?

- On the one hand, we have the orthodox assertion that God is one
- This God has long been called “Father”
- On the other hand, we have the equally orthodox claim that Jesus is God.
- As time went on, some began to feel that these two ideas were in tension. If Jesus is God, and the Father is God, are we not in fact confessing two gods?
- The only solution can be that Jesus must be identical with the Father

### Refining a Heresy – Sabellius

Sabellius takes this line of reasoning and goes farther with it, in part responding to the orthodox critics who challenged its logical consistency.

- Sabellius recognizes that the modal Trinity is a purely economic Trinity (that is to say, God is not eternally Trinity, but only expressed as Trinity in his works).
- Father, Son and Holy Spirit are to be understood as three different ways of being the one God, three different *modes*.

### Some Consequences

- Patripassionism, which claims that the Father suffered on the cross. If “Son” and “Father” are just different names for the same reality, then it follows that the following two statements are equally true: “The Son suffered on the cross;” “the Father suffered on the cross.” Early Modalists seem to have accepted this consequence.
  - Why is this a big deal? Remember the philosophical assumptions: Emotions are a motion in the soul, and motion is only possible where there is inequality. Motion, and therefore emotions, are therefore a sign of imperfection, and unfitting in God. Thus, while it may seem very moving and touching to think of the Father suffering for us, were the Church to make this claim, she would be subject to every manner and ridicule and scorn from every other philosophical sect.
- Exegetical problems—how to make sense of Jesus’ prayers to the Father?
- Sabellius tries to deal with the Patripassionist objection by arguing that God does not suffer as *Father*, but as Son. Thus, even though they are the same person, they are not in every way the same, for the Father *morphs*, if you will, into the Son for the period of the Incarnation. Likewise, in the age following the ascension, God has become the Holy Spirit.
- This strategy may be seen to avoid patripassionism, but it still involves a change in the godhead, and so ultimately is subject to the same criticism.

## Origen (c. 185-254 AD) – The Birth of Systematic Theology

Origen was a theologian of profound influence; his role in church history is problematic, however. He was deeply influenced by late Platonism, and in fact studied with the same philosophical master as Plotinus, the father of Neo-Platonism. Origen is unique in the history of the Church: he was condemned for his teachings 3 centuries after his death, and the Church then promptly forgot the condemnation and continued to celebrate him as one of her great theologians. Extensive editing of his works to make them orthodox is in part responsible for this.

### The Orthodox Origen

- Origen responds to Modalism. He insists that the Father and the Son are two different existences, and have been from all eternity. He goes quite far in this direction, stating “we are not afraid to speak in one sense of two Gods, in another sense of one God” (*Dial. Heracl.* 2). The basis of this strong insistence is the claim that the Son was not created by the Father, but begotten by him. This makes the Son radically unlike us, and necessarily of the same nature as the Father—no human ever gave birth to a goat, so how could God beget anything other than God?
- According to Origen, in his youth he was too literal in his interpretation of Scriptures. He found himself struggling with lust, and in obedience with Jesus’ advice (“if your right hand offends you, cast it off”), he castrated himself. He went on to become the father of allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures, writing commentaries on every book of the Bible.

### Evil Origen

- Origen believed that souls existed before they were born into this world, indeed, existed from all eternity with God. Our glory then was to contemplate God. Somehow, we got distracted and fell away—matter came about as the prison into which we fell. In time, we will return to our former state, though it may take several tries to get back there (i.e., reincarnation). As may be expected, the bodily resurrection causes some trouble for him—he reinterprets it such that what rises is not so much physical as spiritual.
- Origen also believed in universal salvation—everyone would ultimately make it back to union with God, even the demons. A pleasant thought.
- The Son and the Spirit are secondary gods to the Father, who alone is God in the truest since (because he alone is unbegotten). Accordingly, he felt we should not pray to anyone except the Father, as Christ himself did.
- The Father’s power is over all reality; the Son’s is over all rational creatures; the Spirit’s is over those who are being sanctified. To be fair, Origen believes that all will eventually be sanctified, and may believe that all things have souls (rational to some extent), so the distinction might not work out to much in the end. But it still reeks of the error of subordinationism, which is denying equal dignity to the persons of the Godhead.

Evident here is the beginnings of a separation between Eastern and Western theology. Western theology was to emphasize the unity of the Trinity (and thus was generally more receptive of Modalists), Eastern theology the distinctions (and subordinationism found a better reception there). These two trends will be united into the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity in the time period we are studying, but at this juncture it is important to note the rising tension.