

Doctrine of the Trinity and Sabellianism

1. In the first two centuries of the church, there were many heresies that arose from the study of monotheism which led to the study of Monarchianism.
2. These inquiries arose because the church believed in the divine rule of God.

Special Note.

A monarch is a ruler of a nation that is either a king or a queen. The concept comes from the Greek prefix, mono, which means “one”, and, arche, which means, “beginning, chief, or ruler.” So an archangel would be the chief angel. An archenemy would be the chief enemy. The archbishop would be the first bishop. So God is the ruler, and the only ruler, of the universe and the church.

3. The first great heresy in dealing with Monarchianism was called modalistic monarchianism, which was the belief of the Gnostics.
4. The chief idea of modalism is that all of reality, from the stars in the sky to the rocks on earth, manifest a particular mode of the Being of God. There is an inherent pantheism in modalism.
5. According to the Gnostics, at the center of reality is One. From the One, from the Being of God, there arise various emanations that come out from the center.
6. The analogy would be that of throwing a pebble into the water and watching the concentric circles develop from the center where the rock hit the water. The further from the place where the rock was dropped, the weaker the ripples become.
7. The idea is that all of reality is an emanation from God on different levels.
8. There is a spiritual level, an intellectual level, a physical level so that even rocks are part of the One.
9. These emanations manifest the very being of God even though they are in a lower level, a lower mode.
10. A man named Sabellius (c. 215), a theologian from Libya in Africa who taught in Rome, is credited with this idea which suggested development and change within the Godhead.
11. The great error of Sabellius was that he challenged the concept of divine impassibility which means that God cannot be less than God.

12. The position of Sabellius also stood in contrast to the position of distinct persons existing within a single godhead. Sabellius presented God as Father, Son, and Spirit or “modes” in the sense of “aspects” or “faces.”
13. God was not a triune God consisting of three persons in One. Rather, God was One though operating as different manifestations or faces, sometimes as the Father, sometimes as the Son, and sometimes as the Holy Spirit.
14. Sabellius taught that God is like the sun and its rays. Sabellius said there is no difference between the sun and sunbeams for the sunbeams are part of the sun’s nature but removed from its core.
15. Sabellius said that Christ is like a sunbeam. He is an emanation from the Father. He is a lower level than the Father, but He is of the same essence as the Father. He participates in deity, but then so do the rocks.
16. Sabellius used a word to define the relationship between the Father and the Son. He used the Greek term “homoousios”.
17. Athanasius and his followers took great issue with the term “homoousios” and declared it to be unscriptural for when it was defined by Sabellius, the term meant that the Father and the Son were of “one substance” meaning that the Father and the Son were “one essential Person” though operating as different manifestations or faces.
18. At Antioch in AD 267 Sabellius was first condemned. At the Council of Nicea, the church affirmed that God the Son and God the Father are of similar substance (Greek, homoiousios, of “similar substance” or “of similar essence”) in order to emphasize the three persons in the Godhead.