

GF 101: Understanding the Trinity

Lesson 6.4 (article, “Sabellianism”)

1. The article begins by saying heresies are “a failed attempt at orthodoxy.” What does this mean?

An attempt to make sense of the Bible that fails to take into account the full richness of the biblical revelation results in a heresy. And, heresies, are not an outright repudiation of the Bible. Instead, it is part of a truth that is treated as the whole of truth, and thus becomes an untruth—a heresy.

2. What is Sabellianism?¹

Sabellianism teaches that a unipersonal God reveals himself in three “modes” or manifestations.² There are not three permanent distinctions within the Godhead, only three temporary phases in the operations of one divine person.

3. When and where did Sabellius teach his error?

Sabellius was a teacher of Libyan origin who was active in Rome during the early third century (198–222).

4. What heresy did Sabellius refute?

Sabellius sought to refute the charge of Patripassianism, the idea that the Father suffered on the cross.

5. What was error did Sabellius fall into by refuting the aforementioned heresy?

Sabellius denied the fully deity of the Son and the reality of the Incarnation. So, in order to deny that the Father died on the cross, Sabellius denied that the one who was God was actually crucified. Furthermore, after addressing the Father and the Son, he believed the one divine person who is God, in a mode of revelation, came to the Church as the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. One day, according to

¹ Recall from earlier lessons that Sabellianism, also known as Modalism, are forms of the erroneous viewpoint that became known as Monarchianism—a position that emphasized the unity of God (or Oneness, as opposed to Trinitarianism).

² Just as you can be a father to your child, a son to your father, and a husband to your wife, so too God reveals himself, at times, as Father, at other times as Son, and still at other times as Spirit.

Sabellius, the church will no longer need the Spirit in this manner and there will just be unipersonal God—no Father, no Son, and no Spirit.

6. Is “Sabellianism” still around today?

Yes, Sabellianism exists today in the form of Oneness or “Jesus Only” Pentecostalism.

7. What is the assumption of modern-day Sabellians (aka, Modalists, etc.) regarding the nature of God?

They begin with the a presupposition that is left unspoken, the assumption of Unitarianism, which amounts to the logical fallacy of begging the question; assuming the very point that is in fact to be proven.

8. According to the article, what has “long been recognized as the greatest weakness of Modalists”?

The Cross. The Bible uniformly presents Christ’s death as an offering to the Father. 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.

9. According to the text, “if we take the text as it stands, and allow the Bible to speak to us rather than imposing upon it our own ideas,” what important truth lesson do we discover about God?

That we cannot fully comprehend God, and that it is a very arrogant creature who imagines that he, finite as he is, can completely understand his infinite creator.