

## § 5. Doctrine of God: Trinity

### Lecture 6

#### Modalism

Last time we were together we talked about the *Logos* Christology of the early Greek apologists. This doctrine was taken up into Western theology through the church father Irenaeus.

During the following century – the third century – a very different conception of the divine personages emerged in contrast to the *Logos* doctrine of the Greek apologists. People such as Noetus, Praxeus, and Sabellius enunciated a quite different view of God – a unitarian view of God – which goes under various names: Modalism, Monarchianism, or Sabellianism.

According to this view, the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are not distinct persons. There is only one person who is God. Either it was the Father himself who became incarnate and suffered and died on the cross, the Son was at most the human side of the Father so to speak – the human face of God the Father. Or, alternatively, the one God sequentially assumed three roles in his relationship to humanity: first, the Father; then the Son, and then the Holy Spirit.

One of the finest treatises written against this early Modalism is by the North African church father Tertullian who wrote a treatise called *Against Praxeas* (a refutation of the views of Praxeas). This is very much worth reading today. If you want to read a treatise by one of the early church fathers, I think this is the one that I would probably recommend. Tertullian's *Against Praxeas* is a brilliant piece of work. Extremely influential in his treatise, Tertullian brought greater precision to many of the ideas and also introduced much of the terminology that would later be adopted in the credal formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity. Indeed, the word *trinitas* or “Trinity” stems from Tertullian.

Tertullian was very anxious to preserve what was called the divine monarchy, which was a word used by the early Greek apologists for monotheism. To speak of the monarchy of God was to speak of the only true God – the one God. Monotheism. While he wanted to insist upon the truth of the monarchy, Tertullian also wanted to emphasize what he called the divine economy – a word which he borrowed from Irenaeus. The word “economy” in reference to God seems to have reference to the way in which the one God exists. There is one God but he doesn't exist just as one person as the Monarchians or the Modalists thought. He says the error of the Monarchians was “thinking that one cannot believe in one only God in any other way than by saying that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are the very selfsame person.” But Tertullian thinks that while all are one by unity of substance he goes on to say,

the mystery of the economy . . . distributes the unity into a Trinity, placing in their order the three persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: three, however, not in condition but in degree; not in substance but in form; not in power but in aspect; yet of one substance, and of one condition, and of one power, inasmuch as He is one God, from whom these degrees and forms and aspects are reckoned, under the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

On Tertullian's view, there is one God – one substance that God is – but then this is distributed into this economy of three persons each of whom is God.<sup>1</sup>

When Tertullian says that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all one substance, he is using the word “substance” in both of the senses that the Greek philosopher Aristotle employed that term. On the one hand, according to Aristotle, a substance is just any individual thing. Any thing that exists is a substance. So this table is a substance. I am a substance. That chair is a substance. The plant is a substance. They are just individual things. He would say there is one thing which is God. There are not three gods. These three persons are one thing, namely, God. But the other sense in which Aristotle used the word “substance” was to designate the essence of a thing or its very nature. So to talk about substance in this sense was to talk about those properties that go to make a thing what it is. So, for example, a chair has a different essence or nature than a table does or than a horse does. They have different natures or different essences. That is why they are different things – because they have different essential properties. Tertullian wants to affirm that the three persons also share the same essential divine nature. They are one thing – God – but they also share the same nature.

In responding to the proof-text that the Monarchians often used – John 10:30, “I and my Father are one” - Tertullian points out that the fact that you have here a plural subject “I and my Father” and a plural verb “are” indicate that there are two entities – namely, two persons. But he says the predicate here – “one” – is an abstract (not a personal) noun. In Latin, it is the word *unum*, not *unus* – not a personal pronoun but an abstract pronoun. “I and my Father are one” – *unum*. He comments,

*Unum*, a neuter term, . . . does not imply singularity of number, but unity of essence, likeness, conjunction, affection on the Father's part, . . . and submission on the Son's. . . . When he says, “I and my Father are one” in essence – *unum* – He shows that there are two, whom He puts on an equality and unites in one.

So in the proof-text, “I and my Father are one,” you have a multiplicity of persons (two distinct persons) but a unity of essence. “I and my Father are one” - not one person, but one in essence. They have the same nature.

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<sup>1</sup> 5:27

When Tertullian says that the monarchy is distributed into the economy in three forms or aspects, he is not affirming Modalism. Rather, what he is saying is that the diversity of the persons all share the same nature. They are one substance, one thing, having one nature.

It has become conventional wisdom today to say that when these church fathers like Tertullian said that God is three persons they did not mean this in the modern psychological sense of a “person” - as someone who is a center of a self-consciousness - “I.” Rather they just meant to say there are three individuals but not three persons in this psychological sense. But I think when you read Tertullian himself what you'll find is that that claim is, shall we say, greatly exaggerated. It seems to me that Tertullian does think of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as three self-conscious persons.<sup>2</sup> For example, in a remarkable passage which is aimed at illustrating the doctrine of the Son as the immanent *Logos* in the Father's mind (remember, that is what the Greek apologists believed – the *Logos* was originally immanent within the Father as the Father's reason or mind), Tertullian invites the reader, who he says is created in the image and likeness of God and so in that sense is like God, to think about the role of reason in the reader's own self-reflective thinking. He says,

Observe, then, that when you are silently conversing with yourself, this very process is carried on within you by your reason, which meets you with a word at every movement of your thought, at every impulse of your conception.

Tertullian is thinking here of your own reason as a kind of dialogue partner that you engage with in self-reflective thought. I think probably everyone of us has had that experience – a sort of talking to himself where you are sort of engaged in this self-reflective conversation with yourself. Tertullian says that when we do that this reason within you meets you as a sort of self-conscious person. He says in a certain sense the word is a second person within you through which you generate thought.

Of course Tertullian realizes that no human being is literally two persons. But he says when you carry on this conversation with yourself, it is sort of like two persons within you. He says when it comes to God, this is much more fully transacted in God because God contains his immanent *Logos* even when he is not speaking – when he is silent.

Again, when Tertullian wants to prove that the Father and the Son are personally distinct from each other, he quotes passages from the Scriptures in which the Father and the Son use first person and second person pronouns in dialogue with each other. For example, he quotes Psalm 2:7<sup>3</sup> where God says, “Thou art my beloved son, today I have begotten thee.” Quoting this verse, Tertullian says to the Modalist, “If you want me to believe Him

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<sup>2</sup> 10:14

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Craig references the wrong passage here – he meant to reference Psalm 2:7.

to be both the Father and the Son, show me some other passage where it is declared, ‘The Lord said unto himself, I am my own Son, today I have begotten myself.’” And, of course, there is no such passage. He quotes numerous passages which, through the use of these personal pronouns, shows the I-thou relationship in which the Father and the Son stand to each other. An I-you relationship – each one uses the appropriate first-person pronoun in talking to the other as a person.

He challenges the Modalist to explain how a being who is absolutely one and singular can use first-person plural pronouns like “Let us make man in our image.” I think very clearly Tertullian thinks of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as well as capable of using personal pronouns by means of self-reference and addressing each other using second-person pronouns “you” which shows that they are self-conscious persons. Tertullian concludes, “in these few quotations the distinction of persons in the Trinity is clearly set forth.”

I think it is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that Tertullian does believe that the persons of the Trinity are three distinct self-conscious individuals.<sup>4</sup>

The only qualification that might be made to this picture lies in a vestige of the apologists' old *Logos* doctrine in Tertullian's theology. He not only accepts their view that there are relations of derivation between the persons of the Trinity – that the Son, for example, is begotten from the Father – but he also holds to the view that these relations are not eternal. He calls the Father “the fountain of the Godhead.” He says, “the Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole.” The Father, he says, exists eternally with the *Logos* immanent within his mind. But then at the moment of creation the *Logos* proceeds from the Father and becomes his only begotten Son through whom the world is created. So the *Logos* becomes the Son of God only when he first proceeds from the Father as a substantive being.

Tertullian is very fond of using analogies like the sunbeam emitted by the sun or the river that flows out of the spring to show the oneness of the Son with the Father from whom he proceeds. But he didn't think of this procession as eternal as later theologians were to do. He thinks of this as something that starts at the moment of creation. The Son, on his view, is “God of God.” A phrase that will later be incorporated in the Nicene creed. He is God of God. Similarly, the Holy Spirit also proceeds from the Father through the Son.

If I understand him right it would seem that Tertullian would consider the Son and the Spirit to be distinct persons only after their procession from the Father. Before that (as it were, before the moment of creation), they are merely immanent within the Father – he is the fountainhead from which they flow. But they are not at that point personally distinct.

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Nevertheless, once the *Logos* proceeds from the Father and the Spirit from the Father and the Son, they clearly are then distinct persons from that point on.

Through the efforts of church fathers like Tertullian, Origen, Novatian, and many others, the church came to reject Modalism as a proper understanding of God and to affirm that there are three distinct persons within the Godhead who are called Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

During the following century the church would be confronted with a challenge from the opposite end of the spectrum – Arianism – which affirmed the personal distinction of the Father and the Son but denied the deity of the Son. As we'll see, whereas the Modalists affirmed that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all God but not distinct persons, Arius affirmed that the Father, Son and Spirit are distinct persons but they are not all God. Only the Father is God; the Son is, in fact, a creature who was made by God.

### **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* This is a topic that I spend a lot of time reflecting on. Sometimes the response that I get from people – because I write about this topic – is just kind of theological nitpicking because God is either three manifestations or three persons. It doesn't really matter. They believe Jesus is God anyway. How would you respond to that? Do you regard this as very important? Central? The Trinity versus Modalism?<sup>5</sup>

*Dr. Craig:* It is important to understand that the Modalists at least did affirm the deity of Christ, unlike Arius. It does seem to me that Arius' error is more serious because on his view the Son is just a creature which would make worship of him idolatrous. With regard to Modalism, I think there it simply can't do justice to the teaching of Scripture. They would have to say that it is the Father who became incarnate and suffered and died on the cross. That is clearly not right because Jesus during his lifetime is able to pray to and depend on the Father. He is guided by the Holy Spirit. Modalism, it seems to me, just can't do justice to the biblical text which shows that these persons are three distinct members of the Godhead and that we shouldn't confuse them with each other by thinking that the Father died on the cross. Keeping the persons of the Trinity straight, I think, will have practical importance for our devotional life, our Christian life. For example, Jesus taught us to pray to the Father in the name of the Son and then through the power of the Holy Spirit. By keeping these persons of the Trinity straight it can help us to order our devotional lives in a proper way; for example, in prayer.

*Student:* How did the Modalists of the day exegete passages where Jesus is praying to the Father or when it is very clear (at least to me) they are distinct persons?

*Dr. Craig:* It seems that the best they could do would be to say in the incarnation Christ had a human side or a human nature or aspect and that it is the human nature or aspect that is praying to the divine nature or aspect. He really is talking to himself in these prayers, but they would try to make sense of it by saying it is the human side talking to the divine side.

*Student:* That doesn't make any sense to me unless they are two different persons.

*Dr. Craig:* I'm just trying to answer how they would say it. But I think you are quite right. It is a completely inadequate answer to deal with the prayer life of Jesus, for example, when he says to the Father, "Not my will but thine be done" and so forth.

*Student:* I had a question about these heresies we are going over. I understand Modalism to be a different heresy from Monarchianism. Is that correct or not?

*Dr. Craig:* Not in my understanding. My understanding is that these are both unitarian views of God. They might have different explanations of how it is that God appears to be three. Remember I said they might say that Jesus is the sort of human nature of God, or they might say, no, this is God playing three sequential roles. You could have different accounts of how the appearance of threeness arises, but they would be one in their fundamental conviction that God is one person and that the appearance of threeness is just that – it is merely an appearance, it is not real.

*Student:* When I think of Monarchianism I was thinking more along the lines that whoever came up with the heresy saw the Trinity as of all the same substance however there is a subordination in the Trinity – a subordination of the Son to the Father and the Spirit to both of them.

*Dr. Craig:* That is not my understanding of Monarchianism. In one sense that sounds almost Orthodox because in the Orthodox view you have this notion of the Son being begotten from the Father – the Father is the sort of fountainhead from which the Son proceeds. He exists because of the Father. Then the Spirit from the Father and the Son. There is that kind of dependence. You are right. You don't want to say it is subordination in the sense of inferiority because they affirm that they all have the same nature. But there is a kind of dependence. Whether or not that is an acceptable subordination, I think, is a matter of real debate.<sup>6</sup>

*Student:* I would just say that in the economy of redemption there is subordination but that is different than what we are talking about.

*Dr. Craig:* I agree. What you are talking about there is the difference between what is sometimes called the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity. The ontological Trinity would be the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as they are in themselves – God in

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<sup>6</sup> 25:05

himself. There, there is no subordination in the sense of inferiority or subordination of one person to another. But in the economic Trinity this is how the Trinity engages humanity for the plan of salvation. There, there is subordination because the Son submits to and does the Father's will. The Holy Spirit does not glory himself; he glorifies the Son and speaks whatever has been told to him to be said. There, in the economic Trinity, you have a kind of subordination but it is not ontological. It would be the sort of subordination that you would have in a marriage relationship where the wife and the husband are equal before God but for the economy of the family the wife submits to the loving leadership of her husband. That doesn't imply her inferiority in any way. It is a purely economic sort of submission.

*Student:* They would say that there is no distinction of persons, right? It is all one substance but there is no distinction of persons. How would that translate into the fact that all humans bear God's image? Even though we all share the same nature but we are all not the same person. Obviously there is a multiplicity of human persons around, but we all share one thing in common – that is our humanity. We all have the same *imago Deo*, but there is a diversity of persons nevertheless. How would they go about explaining how the *imago Deo* expressed?

*Dr. Craig:* The idea would be that human beings have the same nature. Aristotle said the nature of humanity is to be a rational animal. We have a biological body but a rational soul. When we have three instances of that nature you have three different individuals. We have Adam, John, and George – those each have the same fundamental human nature but each one exemplifies that nature or instantiates that nature as an individual man. We will see that that actually becomes very important in these trinitarian debates over Arianism. I don't think that is a problem for the unitarian. The unitarian would say that God is one person and each one of us is one person. In that sense we are like God. We are made in his likeness and image. We are each one person. What the trinitarian would say is that we do not share God's nature insofar as the fact each of us is one person and not three persons.

*Student:* I was also curious about how the Modalist deals with Jesus referring to the Holy Spirit when he says, *I'm leaving but I'll send a Comforter in my place*. How do they deal with that when there is supposed to be another.

*Dr. Craig:* Here could be what they would say: Jesus says, *Alright, the Holy Spirit is going to come after I leave*. He exists the room, changes clothes, and comes back in as the Holy Spirit. It is really just role playing. It is masquerade really. Where it gets difficult is where you have the three persons at the same time like at the baptism of Jesus where the Father says, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased” and the Spirit descends upon the Son in the form of a dove. That is where it is difficult for the

Modalist to say these are three sequential roles played by the one person because they are all there interacting with each other at the same time.

**END DISCUSSION**

We will now draw it to a close. Next week we will look at the challenge that the church faced in Arianism and how this lead to the Council of Nicaea and the codification of the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>7</sup>