

c. Modalism

Last time 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 (ca. 320), Praxeas (ca. early third century), and Sabellius (ca. 215) 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 (155-220), 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 this 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. 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 this is distributed into this economy of three persons each of whom is God.

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 podium is a substance. I am a substance. That chair is a substance. They are just individual things. Tertullian would say that there is exactly 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 kind of 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” indicates 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.

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, designated by the first-person personal pronoun "I." Rather they just meant to say there are three individuals, but *not* three persons in the modern 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. 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 every one of us has had that experience – talking to yourself, where you are 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 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 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. In 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 capable of using personal pronouns as means of self-reference and addressing one another using the second-person pronoun “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.

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, as he puts it, is “God of God,” a phrase that will later be incorporated in the Nicene creed. The Son is God of God. Similarly, the Holy Spirit also proceeds from the Father through the Son.

If I understand him right, it seems 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. 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 (185-253), Novatian (ca. 251), 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.

Next week we shall look at the challenge that the church faced in Arianism and how this led to the Council of Nicaea and the codification of the doctrine of the Trinity.