

“They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns – broken cisterns that can hold no water.” (Jer 2:13)

✠ Lecture VI: Trinitarian Heresies ✠

In an area of theology as complex as that of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, it is not surprising that a variety of heretical ways of approaching the subject have developed. Heresies concerning the explanation of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity appeared in a variety of guises throughout Church history, but most have polarized along two extremes: **Monarchianism** and **Trithiesim**. Those who overemphasized the aspect of the Oneness of the Holy Trinity to the point of compromising the Eternality, Equality, or Distinction among the Three Hypostasis are said to profess Monarchianism. At the opposite extreme, those who divide the Godhead into three separate entities have embraced Trithiesim, which was never formally promulgated in the history of Christian doctrine.

→ **Monarchianism:** is an excessive and unscriptural insistence on the rigid Unity of the Godhead, which precludes the existence of a Trinity. There are three subcategories within Monarchianism:

- a) **Modalistic Monarchianism (Modalism)**
- b) **Dynamic Monarchianism (Adoptianism)**
- c) **Arianism**

I) Modalism:

The term “Modalism” describes the common element of a group of Trinitarian heresies, associated with Noetus and Praxeas in the late second century, and **Sabellius** in the third. Sabellius introduced a more sophisticated form of Modalism giving it the name **Sabellianism**, which is the notion that the One Unique God manifested Himself in three different modes or stages. Sabellianism maintains that the Singular God appeared initially as the Father (Creator and Lawgiver) in the Old Testament. God then manifested Himself in the four Holy Gospels as the Son (Redeemer), meanwhile ceased to exist as the Father. Beginning with the Day of Pentecost, God began to manifest Himself as the Holy Spirit (Giver of Grace), and is therefore no longer either the Father or the Son. There is no difference, save the appearance and chronological manifestation among the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity; there are thus three names for the same Person.

→ **Sabellianism therefore denies the Eternal coexistence of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.** It teaches that God is Three Persons only in relation to the world in so many “manifestations” or “modes.” Present day groups that hold to this heresy are the **United Pentecostal** and **United Apostolic** denominations.

The identification of the Son as the Father Himself led to the charge of **Patripassianism** (Latin: *patris* “father”; *passus* “to suffer”), which became another label for Modalism. Patripassianism is the teaching that it was the Father who became incarnate, was borne of a virgin, and who suffered and died on the cross.

→ **An analogy for Sabellianism:** The heresy of Sabellius can be illustrated by the analogy of the water that exists in three different forms or modes: ice, liquid, and vapor. Thus it is the same water but in different forms the same way the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are claimed to be mere manifestation of the one God.

II) Adoptianism:

This heresy is associated with **Paul Samosata**, Bishop of Antioch. It maintains that only the Father is genuinely God, and thus, that neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit can properly be accorded the same rank of Deity as the Father. Hence, Adoptianism tend to believe that Lord Jesus Christ was merely a man upon whom the Father conferred special favor or status that he never genuinely possessed. To them the Son was appointed, adopted, or elevated to a god during his baptism, but certainly never is in the same way in which the Father is God. Further, proponents of Adoptianism also deny that the Holy Spirit is a distinct Person or Hypostasis within the Godhead, but is instead merely a manifestation of the Father’s grace.

III) Arianism:

This heresy bears some resemblance to Adoptianism; it denies both the Eternality and the Absolute Deity of the Son. This heresy holds that the Son is not of the same Divine Essence as the Father. Arianism teaches that the Son had been begotten at some point in time. Hence by extension, as a common Arian expression asserts, “There was a time when The Son was not!”

(More details in lecture I: “Heresies concerning The Nature of Our Lord Jesus Christ” – Christology)

→ Present day groups that hold to this heresy are **Jehovah’s Witnesses** and the **Adventists**.

→ The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is the distinctive mark of the Christian religion setting it apart from all other religions of the world. Therefore, any group that does not believe in the Holy Trinity is not worthy to be called Christian even though it may introduce itself as such.
