

Against the Modern Modalist: An Apology of the Holy Trinity

Part I: Concerning the Trinity Proper

“[The Trinity] should be discussed in our public writings, in Christian schools, and according to circumstances, if a special necessity of some church demands this, even in sermons against the very destructive errors of the Antitrinitarians who are directly subverting the very foundation of faith.”

~ Johann Gerhard, *On the Trinity* I 13

On May 9, 2019, a religious official and prominent member of the Mound City community shared publicly a declaration against the Fathers of the church, against the historic teachings of the church, against the teachings of Christ, against use of the Triune Name at Baptism, and against the existence of the Holy Trinity itself. In order not to allow such public teachings to corrupt the minds and hearts of the faithful, public address is necessary in keeping with scriptural truths and the confession of the catholic church.

Definition of Terms

Modalism is a common name for the heresy of Sabellianism. The heresy is named for its most prominent proponent, a third-century theologian named Sabbelius. Modalism holds that there is only one essential person of God who works through three separate “modes” to accomplish his work. Modalists assert the divinity of Jesus as the Father made flesh, denying the plurality of persons contained within the godhead.

The Issues:

Statement 1: The doctrine of the Trinity was invented during the second century, but did not exist until that point.

Theses:

1. God is one. (*Deut 4:35–39; 6:4; 1 Tim 2:5; Jas 2:19*)
 - Oneness refers to the unity of God, not to the number. It is one thing to say, “God is one,” and another to say “There is one God.” Scripture indicates that both statements are true, but such declarations are made separately.
 - “O mystic marvel! The universal Father is one, and one the universal Word; and the Holy Spirit is one and the same everywhere.”
~ St. Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor* I 6.
2. Within the oneness of God are multiple persons, coequal and coeternal. (*Gen 1:1–3, 26; 3:22; 11:7; Isa 6:8; Ps 45:6–7; John 1:1–4*)
 - The name of God most commonly used in Scripture is *Elohim*, appearing 2,750 times throughout the Old Testament. *him* is a suffix in the Hebrew language which denotes a plural. However, in the Old Testament *Elohim* is the only plural word of its kind used as a singular name.
 - When God speaks of himself with himself, he utilizes plural pronouns even within the singularity of his being, thus indicating a distinction of united persons within the godhead.
 - “To us there is One God, for the Godhead is One, and all that proceedeth from Him is referred to One, though we believe in Three Persons. . . . When then we

look at the Godhead . . . that which we conceive is One; but when we look at the Persons in Whom the Godhead dwells, and at Those Who timelessly and with equal glory have their Being from the First Cause—there are Three Whom we worship.”

~ St. Gregory Nazianzen, *Theological Orations* V 14

3. The persons of the godhead are distinct even in their unity, and are distinctly identified. (*Ps 110:1; Matt 3:13–17; 17:1–8; John 3:22–36; 2 Cor 13:13; Gal 4:1–7*)

- In many instances, Scripture explicitly makes mention of the persons of the Trinity. They are never divided, but always united in their function and work even as they are identified as distinctly separate persons. The Old Testament preaches this reality and informs the New Testament. Likewise does the New Testament proclaim the very same doctrine which is attested by the entirety of Scripture.
- “[The] Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit intimate a divine unity of one and the same substance in an indivisible equality; and therefore . . . they are not three Gods, but one God.”

~ St. Augustine, *Concerning the Trinity* IV 7

4. Jesus is the Son of God, as distinct from the person of the Father. (*Gen 18:1–5 + John 1:18; 6:46; Exod 16:10 + Acts 9:1–5; Isa 48:12–16 + Luke 4:16–21 + John 18:20–21; Ps 2:7; Prov 8:22–23; Isa 6: 3; Matt 27:41–43; Luke 4:1–13; 23:44–46; John 17*)

- Throughout Scripture the Messiah is identified as being of God and yet distinct from God. Similarly, the Son of God, eternally begotten, is identified throughout Scripture as such. The Gospels record explicitly that Jesus is the Son of God. Especially in the account of his baptism does it become apparent that Jesus is one of three externally observed members of the Holy Trinity.
- “A father must needs have a son, in order to be a father; so likewise a son, to be a son, must have a father. It is, however, one thing to have, and another thing to be. For instance; I can never myself be my own wife. In like manner, in order to be a father, I have a son, for I never can be a son to myself; and in order to be a son, I have a father, it being impossible for me ever to be my own father.”

~ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* X

Statement 2: The word “Trinity” does not appear anywhere in Scripture. For that reason, the doctrine of the Trinity ought to be discarded as a fallacy.

Theses:

1. The doctrine of the Trinity is clearly stated throughout the entirety of Scripture.
 - As has been shown previously, Scripture clearly sets forth the reality of the Holy Trinity even apart from the word “Trinity.”
2. Vocabulary not found in Scripture in no way negates the truths of Scripture.
 - It is a foolish an arrogant attitude which discounts a doctrine of Scripture for lack of the proper vocabulary. The meaning of Scripture is present within the text, and, consequently, the sense of Scripture is Scripture. Thus, the dichotomy

between what Scripture says and what Scripture means is relatively artificial, for the meaning of Scripture works harmoniously with language to convey itself, even if particular and desirable vocabulary is not utilized.

- Doctrines are not mindless quotations from Scripture or uneducated repetitions of voiced and written syllables, but a synthesis of the information Scripture provides.
- Vocabulary, specifically within the church, exists for the sole purpose of conveying and discussing ideas, concepts, and, theologically speaking, realities which otherwise would remain beyond the grasp of man. Regarding the Holy Trinity, Scripture presents the reality of who, what, and how God is. However, in order to comprehend, synthesize, discuss, and attempt to grasp this reality and this concept of God, man must have a word by which to call it. The power of words—of “what to call a thing”—is undeniable and inescapable for the human mind gifted with reason. Vocabulary is utilized not to demean Scripture or to invent teachings, but rather by necessity to understand Scripture. (*Ps 16 + Acts 2:29–33*)
- “Nobody uses words except in order to signify something. From this it may be understood what I mean by signs: those things which are employed to signify something. . . . Yet although nothing can be spoken in a way worthy of God, he has sanctioned the homage of the human voice, and chosen that we should derive pleasure from our words in praise of him. Hence the fact that he is called God: he himself is not truly known by the sound of these two syllables [i.e., those of the Latin *Deus*], yet when the sound strikes the ear it leads all users of the Latin language to think of a supremely excellent and immortal being.”
~ St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* I 5, 14
- “The necessity of speaking and debating allowed us to say ‘three persons’ not because the Scripture says it but because the Scripture does not contradict it.”
~ St. Augustine, *Concerning the Trinity* VII 7 8
- “Words do not belong more to the speaker of them than to him who called them forth. As, then, in this case, I should have been looking, not so much at the terms used, as at the thoughts they were meant to convey.”
~ St. Gregory Nazianzen, *Theological Orations* V 24
- “To be sure, the Church does not have an autocratic power to fashion new articles of faith, since she is bound by divine command to the voice of Christ, her Bridegroom, which is heard only in Scriptures. However, the Church can nevertheless explain articles of faith declared in the Scriptures in words other than those that are in the Scriptures.”
~ Johann Gerhard, *On the Trinity* II 39