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CS07

Michaelmas Term

“In what ways has the Holy Spirit in particular suffered at the hands of flawed Trinitarian explanations, and how has the Church responded in articulating the Spirit's Person as One of the Trinity?”

January 18, 2016

Word Count: 2592

Pneumatological Errors Past and Present

In today's smorgasbord of theological novelties, it is not surprising that many of the classical heresies of the first millennium have modern counterparts. In this essay I will discuss the heresies of Pneumatomachianism and Sabellianism (modalism) as well as two modern expressions of these heresies.

The Pneumatomachians ("Spirit Fighters"), also known as Macedonians, accepted the divinity of Christ as proclaimed by the Council of Nicaea in 325. However, they denied that the Holy Spirit was a co-equal, co-eternal Person of the Holy Trinity Who is consubstantial with the Father and the Son. Instead, they claimed the Spirit was created by the Son and is a servant of the Father and the Son. The original Nicene Creed of 325 gave a brief mention of the Spirit: "We believe in the Holy Spirit." The Macedonian heresy prompted the fathers of the Second Ecumenical Council at Constantinople to elaborate on the Person of the Holy Spirit and expanded the Creed to include:

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, Who proceedeth from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is equally worshipped and glorified, Who spake by the Prophets.

This heresy was named after Macedonius, who was an Arian bishop of Constantinople. Macedonianism was condemned by the Second Ecumenical Council in 381, largely through the

efforts of the Cappadocian Fathers: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzuz and Gregory of Nyssa. According to Saint Basil, the Sabellians deny “God from God and confess the Son in name, but in deed and truth eliminate his existence”¹ His existence is eliminated because in the modalist scheme, the Son, as well as the Spirit, are not distinct Persons but are manifestations from the Godhead as the situation requires, now appearing as the Father, now as the Son, now and the Holy Spirit. For a modalist, the Father is the Son who is the Holy Spirit who is the Father.

Relying heavily on the Holy Scriptures to demonstrate the personhood of the Spirit, Saint Basil directs us to observe certain attributes of the Spirit that show He is person and not a created force. He is able to be grieved: “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30). He can be resisted: “You do always resist the Holy Ghost” (Acts 7:51). He can be vexed: “They vexed His Holy Spirit, therefore He was turned to be their enemy” (Isaiah 63:10). He can be angered, with Basil noting that the House of Jacob angered the Spirit of the Lord. He concludes: “Are not these passages indicative of authoritative power?”² He will leave it to the judgment of his readers, he writes, if the cited Scriptures are describing the Spirit as an “instrument” of equal rank as the rest of the creatures or a member of the Holy Trinity, consubstantial with the Father and the Son.³

This heresy appeared under several guises in the early Church. “Sabellian” refers not only to the original disciples of Sabellius but to the followers of Marcellus of Ancyra who, one might say, took the Nicene doctrine of *homoousios* too far, appearing to deny the distinctions of the

¹ Basil of Caesarea, *Against the Sabellians, Anomoians, and Pneumatomachians*.

² Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*.

³ Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 50.

Persons of the Holy Trinity in favor of an “undifferentiated monad.”⁴ The Anomoians, also called *heteroousians*, were followers of Aetius and Eunomius and took the other extreme. They believed that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were “*anomoios*,” that is, unlike each other. Saint Basil saw them as polytheists:

For those who claim that the Only-Begotten is a work of God and something made, then adore him and speak of him as divine, are clearly introducing Hellenic teaching because they worship a creature and not the Creator”⁵

In other words, those who believe the Second and Third Persons of the Trinity are mere creatures yet worship them nonetheless have fallen into idolatry. The Pneumatomachians, a name coined by Saint Athanasius of Alexandria, taught that the Father and Son were *homoousios* but the Spirit was a created being. In his creed Athanasius gives the correct Orthodox doctrine of the place of the Holy Spirit in the Holy Trinity:

And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Fr. Aidan Kimel, “St Basil the Great: Homily Against the Sabellians et Alios (part 1)”, *Eclectic Orthodoxy* (<https://afkimel.wordpress.com/2014/01/13/st-basil-the-great-homily-against-the-sabellians-et-alios-part-1/>) <18 January 2016>.

⁵ Basil of Caesarea, *Homily Against the Sabellians*.

A surprising number of Christians today are confused about the personhood of the Holy Spirit, even those who consider themselves to be Trinitarians. In a survey conducted in 2014 by Life Way Research for Ligonier Ministries, it was discovered that

More than half (51%) said that the Holy Spirit is a force, not a personal being. Seven percent weren't sure, while only 42 percent affirmed that the Spirit is a person. And 9 percent said the Holy Spirit is less divine than God the Father and Jesus. The same percentage answered "not sure."⁶

One might, with all charity, suspect that these American Evangelicals spoke out of ignorance and if better educated, would fall in line with a proper (if Western) view of the personhood of the Holy Spirit. However, there are modern sects that deliberately deny the personhood of the Holy Spirit. One such group is the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, more familiarly known as the Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Jehovah's Witness sect was founded in the late nineteenth century by Charles Taze Russell. The movement grew out of the American Restorationist movement which had as its goal the restoration of a so-called primitive Christianity. A common tenet of these groups was the belief that Christianity existed in a pristine form until Emperor Constantine, in their opinion,

⁶ Kevin P. Emmert, "New Poll Finds Evangelicals' Favorite Heresies", Christianity Today (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/october-web-only/new-poll-finds-evangelicals-favorite-heresies.html>) <18 January 2016>.

forced erroneous beliefs and practices upon the Church. The Jehovah's Witnesses claim that a belief in the Holy Trinity was one of the false doctrines foisted upon the Church.⁷

On the Jehovah's Witnesses' official web site, the question is posed: "What is the Holy Spirit?" (Emphasis mine.) Note that the question is not "Who is the Holy Spirit?" The response:

In the Bible, God's holy spirit [Note lack of capitalization] is identified as God's power in action. Hence, an accurate translation of the Bible's Hebrew text refers to God's spirit as "God's active force."⁸

This statement appears on another web site, Jehovah's Witnesses United:

The Bible's use of "holy spirit" indicates that it is a controlled force emanating from Jehovah God that He uses to accomplish a variety of things relative to his purposes. To a certain extent it can be likened to electricity....⁹

Since the Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe that the Son is consubstantial with the Father, they differ from the Pneumatomachians who did believe in the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son. The Witnesses believe the Son was the first creation of the Father and therefore suffer from the heresy of Arianism as well as from Pneumatomachianism, proving the words of

⁷ Stephen E. Jones, "Jehovah's Witnesses A-Z: Apostasy", *Jesus Is Jehovah* (<http://jesusisyhwh.blogspot.com/2012/02/jehovahs-witnesses-z-apostasy.html>) <18 January 2016>.

⁸ "Bible's Viewpoint: Is the Holy Spirit a Person?", *Watchtower Online Library* (<http://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/102006245>) <18 January 2016>.

⁹ Chuck McManigal, "The Holy Spirit, God's Active Force", *Jehovah's Witnesses United* (<http://jehovah.to/exe/general/holyspirit.htm>) <18 January 2016>.

Saint Basil in his Preface to his book on the Holy Spirit, “The heresy of Arius lowered the dignity of the Holy Ghost as well as that of the Son.”¹⁰

If the Holy Spirit is just a force, then He cannot be considered to be one distinct Person. Saint Basil writes that the Spirit is never described as existing among the plurality of the rest of creation. Rather,

One, moreover, is the Holy Spirit, and we speak of Him singly, conjoined as He is to the one Father through the one Son, and through Himself completing the adorable and blessed Trinity. Of Him the intimate relationship to the Father and the Son is sufficiently declared by the fact of His not being ranked in the plurality of the creation, but being spoken of singly; for he is not one of man, but One.¹¹

Since the Witnesses believe that the Spirit is a controlled force that accomplishes various tasks for the monad they call Jehovah, it’s not a stretch to conclude they view the Spirit as a servant or slave to the Father, as did the Pneumatomachians. Saint Basil refuted this idea by quoting the Apostle Paul who wrote “Ye are the temple of God, and the Spirit of God dwelleth within you.”(I Corinthians 3:16). How could a “temple” be equated with slave quarters? Basil asked.¹²

The Spirit is called “He:” “He [the Holy Spirit] will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you” (John 14:26). The Spirit has a voice: "For it is not you who

¹⁰ Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, Preface.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you” (Matthew 10:20). The Holy Spirit has a will, which is demonstrated by his distribution of the gifts to the Church (1 Corinthians 12:11). Throughout Scripture, the Holy Spirit is referred to as a “Who” and not a “What.” It is obvious just from these few examples that the Holy Spirit is more than a force that can be compared to electricity. The Holy Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church attest to the personhood of the Holy Spirit, who is “One of the Holy Trinity.”

The heresy of Sabellianism, also called modalism, modalistic monarchianism and patripassianism distorts the personhood of the Holy Spirit in a different way. Epiphanius reported that Sabellius regarded the Godhead as a monad which expressed itself in three operations.¹³ “The Godhead regarded as creator and lawgiver was the Father, for redemption it was projected like a ray of the sun, and was then withdrawn, then thirdly, the same Godhead operated as Spirit to inspire and bestow grace.”¹⁴

Again quoting Epiphanius, the followers of Sabellius are said to have queried, “What shall we say? Do we have one God or three Gods?” They claimed they were not polytheists, inferring that Trinitarians were.¹⁵

Modalism was promulgated by Praxeas (late 2nd- early third century) and Sabellius (early third century). Tertullian wrote against them that

¹³ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1978), p 122.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Fr. Georges Florovsky, “The Byzantine Fathers of the Fifth Century”, *Holy Trinity Mission* (http://www.holytrinitymission.org/books/english/fathers_florovsky_2.htm#_Toc16316397) <18 January 2016>.

They fail to understand that, although he is the one only God, He must yet be believed in with his own order. The numerical order and distribution of the Trinity they assume to be a division of the Unity, whereas the Unity which derives the Trinity out of its own self is so far from being destroyed, that it is actually supported by it.¹⁶

In other words, according to Tertullian, modalists have an erroneous view of what Trinitarians actually believe about the persons of the Godhead. They perceive of a Trinitarian God parceled out into three lots, much as a pie could be cut into three slices. This would be tritheism and is not the Orthodox view which believes that each member of the Trinity is one-hundred percent God and not one-third of God. In their zeal to maintain a strict monotheism without sacrificing the divinity of Christ they lost the distinctions between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A modern example of the modalist heresy is the United Pentecostal Church, also known as Oneness Pentecostalism, Apostolic Pentecostalism and Jesus' Name Pentecostalism. This organization was founded in 1945 when several Pentecostal bodies merged. They are adherents to what they called the "oneness" doctrine, also known as "Jesus Only." As of 1998 this organization claimed 600,000 members in North America¹⁷ and seven Bible colleges. The denomination's headquarters are located in Hazelwood, Missouri. They practice baptism in the name of "Jesus Only" and perceive themselves as strict monotheists:

¹⁶ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*.

¹⁷ Frank S. Mead and Samuel S. Hill, *Handbook of the Denominations in the United States* (Nashville:Abingdon Press), p. 289.

As we have seen, the whole Bible teaches a strict monotheism.... The one God is Father of all, is holy, and is a Spirit. Therefore, the titles Father and Holy Spirit describe the same being. To put it another way, the one God can and does fill simultaneously the two roles of Father and Holy Spirit.¹⁸

It is clear that the terms Father, Son, and Holy Ghost cannot imply three separate person, personalities, wills, or beings. They can only denote different aspects or roles of one Spirit-being. They describe God's relationship to man, not persons in a Godhead.¹⁹

The Fathers of the Church had much to say concerning the modalists of their day and would no doubt have much to say about today's modalists.. Saint Gregory of Caesarea declared that they treated the Holy Trinity "in an awful manner" when they confidently assert there are not three persons.²⁰ He continues:

But if they say, "How can there be three Persons, and how but one one Divinity?" we shall make this reply: There are indeed three Persons, inasmuch as there is one person of God the Father,

¹⁸ David K. Bernard, JD, "The Oneness of God", *Series in Pentecostal Theology* (<http://web.archive.org/web/20080216034825/http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/pentecostal/One-Top.htm>)

<18 January 2016>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Gregory of Caesarea, *A Sectional Confession of Faith*, 8.

and one of the Lord the Son, and one of the Holy Spirit; and yet that there is but one divinity..... one substance in the Trinity.²¹

Writing even earlier than Saint Gregory, Saint Ignatius of Antioch commented on modalism in his letter to the Trallians: “Some of them say that the Son is a mere man and that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are but the same person...” He called these teachings poison.²²

Saint Basil wrote that the disciples of Sabellius actually denied the name of the Son of God:

Now Sabellius... saying as he did that the same God, being being one in matter, was metamorphosed as the need of the moment required, and spoken of now as Father, now as Son, and now as Holy Holy Ghost. The inventors of this unnamed heresy are renewing the old long extinguished error.... Denying the name of the Son of God. They must give over uttering iniquity against God, or they will have to wail with them that deny the Christ.²³

To conclude, it becomes obvious that when one gets one’s Trinitarianism wrong, many other errors will soon follow. As Saint Ignatius wrote to the Trallians, “hey intermix the poison of their deceit with their persuasive talk, as if they mingled aconite with sweet wine.”²⁴ No doubt Sabellius, Macedonius, and the others had the best of intentions of preserving a pure monotheism but in the process, destroyed the personhood of not only the Holy Spirit but also the Father and the Son.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Trallians*, VI.

²³ Basil of Caesarea, *Letter 210*.

²⁴ Ignatius, *Trallians*.

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