

David W Fletcher, Fall 1982

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IS MODALISM A VIABLE TRINITARIAN CONCEPT?

Holy, holy, holy!
Merciful and mighty!
God in three persons,
Blessed trinity!

So reads the familiar hymn by Reginald Heber. Reflected in these lines is an ancient Christian conception of God—“one substance in three persons.”¹ This ancient trinitarian formula mirrors the triadic manifestation of the Godhead that is evidenced in scripture. Such formulas are not found in scripture, but they are based on the theological phenomena, or statements about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, that are found in scripture. William Rusch confirms this when he writes:

The early catechetical and liturgical formulas refer to the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, or to the Father the Creator, his Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. These twofold and threefold patterns are evident within the New Testament itself. . . . [But] there is no fixity of wording. No doctrine of the Trinity in the Nicene sense is present in the New Testament. However, the threefold pattern is evident throughout, in spite of the fact that there is usually nothing in the context to demand it. The conclusion seems obvious: the idea of triadic manifestation of the Godhead was present from the earliest period as part of Christian piety and thinking. But no steps were taken to work through the implications of the idea and to arrive at a cohesive doctrine of God. The triadic pattern supplies the raw data from which the more developed descriptions of the Christian doctrine of God will come.²

¹This is from the Latin, *una substantiae tria persona*. Compare the Greek equivalent, *one ousia* in three *hypostases*.

²William G. Rusch, ed., *The Trinitarian Controversy*, Sources of Early Christian Thought, ed. William G. Rusch (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), 2.

To summarize Rusch, the New Testament gives no “systematic” or “explained” doctrine of God. But monotheism is affirmed strongly, and the three-fold manifestation of deity likewise is stated or affirmed. The authors of the New Testament attempt no harmonization; they assume the trustworthiness of both dogmas. Later writers, beginning with the Apologists,³ went beyond the New Testament doctrine of God to formulate a “consistent” theology. For them, to merely state the biblical theology with little or no explanation was not sufficient. The threat of heresy demanded a “systematic” answer or response.

One such threat to the orthodox understanding of God appeared in the late second and early third centuries. Certain teachers in the Western church feared that the *Logos doctrine* of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and others threatened the unity of God.⁴ “Because this reaction wished to accentuate that God was an absolute monad without distinctions within the unity, it became known as monarchianism.”⁵ The designation comes from the Greek term *monarchia* that means “sole ruler.”

It is apparent that the Monarchians did not properly use the term *monarchia*—at least not in the Catholic sense, as maintaining that there is only one *arche*, source or fountain of Deity, the Father, which sense implies the existence of the Begotten Son and Proceeding Spirit as distinct Persons; nor in the sense of unity, for unity can only be asserted when there is plurality; nor, again, in the sense of God’s sole government, which affirms nothing concerning the existence or non-existence of a distinction of Persons in the Godhead; but they used it in the sense of simple oneness, from which oneness they

³See Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 3ff.

⁴See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), 95ff.

⁵Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 8.

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argued that the Godhead is so simple a being as to be *monoprosopos*—a solitary, single Hypostasis.⁶

Monarchianism assumed two basic, and essentially different, responses to the Logos doctrine.⁷

One response was to say “that God who created the world was so incarnate in Jesus that there is no difference to be discerned between the ‘Son’ and the ‘Father’”⁸ (e.g., *modalistic monarchianism*). The other response was to say “that Jesus was a man like other men, differentiated in being indwelt by the Spirit of God to an absolute and unique degree”⁹ (e.g., *dynamic monarchianism*).

On the one hand, dynamic monarchianism, properly called “adoptionism,” salvaged the unity of God by abandoning the deity of Jesus (i.e., he was only a man on whom the Spirit descended at his baptism).¹⁰ According to Paul of Samosata:

⁶“Monarchians,” *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, eds. John McClintock and James Strong, Vol. VI (1876; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1969), 448.

⁷“The classification of both as forms of monarchianism stems from the assumption that, despite different starting-points and motives, they were united by a concern for the divine unity, or *monarchia*. This supposition goes back at least as far as Novatian (c. 250), who interpreted adoptionism and modalism as misguided attempts to salvage the Bible dogma that God is one.” Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed., 115-116.

⁸Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, Vol. 1, *The Pelican History of the Church*, ed. Owen Chadwick (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1967), 86.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Compare docetism which advocated a similar christology but from a different presupposition (i.e., metaphysical dualism). See “Cerinthus,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., eds. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1974), 261.

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The Godhead was a closely knit Trinity of Father, Wisdom, and Word and until creation formed a single hypostasis. . . . From the Incarnation the Word rested upon the human Jesus as one person upon another, and that the Incarnate Christ differed only in degree from the Prophets.¹¹

On the other hand, modalistic monarchianism, properly labeled “modalism,” safeguarded the unity of God by denying any essential differentiation in the Godhead. Father, Son, and Spirit are only *modes* of the same being—*economically* and *temporarily* revealed in the divine plan for man’s redemption, but in no way *ontologically* or *eternally* applicable to the Godhead. Other ancient designations for this teaching are “Patripassianism” (i.e., the Father suffers) and “Sabellianism” (from the name of the obscure third century church member at Rome who taught such).¹²

Like adoptionism, modalism held to the oneness of God. But unlike adoptionism, modalism believed in the full deity of Jesus.

What forced it into the open was the mounting suspicion that the former of these truths was being endangered by the new Logos doctrine and by the efforts of theologians to represent the Godhead as having revealed Itself in the economy as tri-personal. Any suggestion that the Word or Son was other than, or a distinct Person from, the Father seemed to the modalists to lead inescapably to the blasphemy of two Gods.¹³

¹¹“Paul of Samosata,” *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., 1052-1053. Compare Rusch’s treatment of Paul of Samosata, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 8; and Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed., 117-119.

¹²See “Sabellius,” *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Vol. IX, 202-203.

¹³Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed., 119.

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According to Sabellius, “God was a monad, expressing itself in three operations. The Father projected himself first as Son and then as Spirit.”¹⁴ J. P. Lacroix thinks that “Sabellius held the Jewish position of a strict monotheism, recognizing only a single divine substance and a single hypostasis. . . . The one divine substance simply assumes three forms . . . in its threefold relation to the world. . . . It is three successive forms of manifestation of the one divine substance.”¹⁵ But whether Sabellius spoke of Father, Son, and Spirit as three *prosopa* (“masks” or “faces”) is disputed.

The intention of Sabellius and other teachers of modalism was honorable. But like many heresies, one biblical teaching was distorted due to an overemphasis of another biblical teaching.¹⁶ A misguided zeal and misunderstanding of the oneness of God forced a strained and even impossible interpretation of the New Testament revelation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

¹⁴Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, 9.

¹⁵“Sabellius,” *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Vol. IX, 203. Compare the quote from Epiphanius in Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1942), 54.

¹⁶“Heresy usually starts out as a vehement assertion of an authentic but only partial aspect of revelation of original church teaching. Developed consistently, this single doctrine becomes deformed and compromises the balance in theology as a whole.” James North, “Ancient Church History” Course Lecture, 12 October 1982 (Cincinnati, OH: Cincinnati Christian Seminary).

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In forcing strained interpretations on the biblical text, the doctrine of God taught by certain present-day Pentecostal groups parallels ancient modalism.¹⁷ In a debate with Guy N. Woods of the *a capella* Churches of Christ, Marvin A. Hicks of the United Pentecostal Church affirmed that “the Godhead is in one person—Jesus Christ.”¹⁸ In reply to the question—“Would the following baptismal formula be scriptural, ‘I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of Jesus the Son, and of the Holy Ghost?’”—Mr. Hicks omitted the name “Jesus” and said:

It would [be] if you would find the name of the Father, and the name of the Son, and the name of the Holy Ghost, and baptize in that name like the apostles did. . . . The Father’s name is Jesus, the Son’s name is Jesus, and the Holy Ghost’s name is Jesus. So that’s why we baptize in the name of Jesus.¹⁹

Hicks added later, “Jesus is not a member of the Godhead, but the Godhead is in Jesus Christ. In Jesus you will find the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost.”²⁰ Hicks’ “modalistic Jesus” strikingly is similar to, but not as sophisticated as, Sabellius’ “modalistic divine essence.”

¹⁷See Harvey Floyd, *Is the Holy Spirit for Me?* (Nashville, TN: 20th Century Christian, 1981), 11; compare Robert Glenn Gromacki, *The Virgin Birth: Doctrine of Deity* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1974), 25. Other current religious groups, like the Worldwide Church of God and the Assemblies of Yahweh deny the personality of the Holy Spirit and hold to a sort of di-personal deity (e.g., Father and Son). But this is not the same as modalism. See Garner Ted Armstrong, “Part Two: Why Is the ‘Trinity’ Not Mentioned in Scripture?” *Good News* (November 1975): 1-4; and Donald R. Mansager, “Is the Trinity Scriptural?” *The Sacred Name Broadcaster* (May 1979): 1-9.

¹⁸*Woods-Hicks Debate*, cassette recordings (Kennett, MO: n.p., May 5-8, 1975).

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*

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Modalism, whether ancient or modern, fails as a viable trinitarian concept for three basic reasons. First, it misunderstands the biblical doctrine about the oneness or unity of God. Second, it denies any real differentiation within the being of God. Third, it forces ludicrous and nonsensical interpretations on the interaction of Father, Son, and Spirit in New Testament texts, interpretations that logically lead to a flawed christology.

Scripture affirms the oneness or unity of God. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4, NIV). Biblical faith is monotheistic faith.²¹ But the oneness of God does not preclude diversity or distinction within the realm or essence of deity. The Hebrew word translated “one” in Deuteronomy 6:4 is *echad*.²² While *echad* does not mean necessarily “a united one” or “a compound unity,”²³ the relationship of the term to *yachid* is important. *Yachid* in some contexts²⁴ means “one and only” or “a solitary one.”²⁵ Such use in context precludes diversity. But *yachid* never is used in the Old Testament to refer to God. The point is that while *echad* does not necessarily indicate diversity in the Godhead, it does not prohibit such.

²¹See Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. William Hendriksen (1951; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977), 165ff.

²²See also Zechariah 14:9; Malachi 2:10; compare Genesis 1:5; 2:24.

²³This is assumed to be the case by Loraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology*, 14th ed. (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1947), 104-106. A quick survey of any analytical concordance will show the singular nature of the word. Even the *echad* of Deuteronomy 6:4 stresses the singularity of God in light of the polytheism of the gods of the Canaanites (see verses 10ff.).

²⁴Compare the use of the piel of *yachid* in Psalm 86:11 and the substantive form in 1 Chronicles 12:17.

²⁵See, for example, Genesis 22:2; Judges 11:34; Jeremiah 6:26; and Zechariah 12:10.

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The New Testament similarly affirms the oneness or unity of God. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Mark 12:29, NIV).²⁶ Mark’s mention of Jesus’ quote from Deuteronomy 6:4 uses the Greek word *heis* for the Hebrew word *echad*.²⁷ The Greek word *heis* like the Hebrew word *echad* does not rule out diversity. In fact, *heis* sometimes means the whole in contrast to individual parts of the whole.²⁸

That *heis* can convey a unity of distinct and real persons in reference to deity is seen by Paul’s statements in 1 Corinthians 8. Paul affirms, “There is no God but one” (verse 4, NIV). His language echoes Old Testament passages like Isaiah 45:5, “I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God” (NIV).²⁹ God is alone in his being, his essence. But Paul just as strongly affirms, in contrast to the polytheism of the Greek and Roman pantheons, the presence of two “ones” within the one “one.” He writes:

For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live (verses 5-6, NIV).

²⁶See also Romans 3:30; James 2:19; compare 1 Corinthians 8:4-6; 1 Timothy 2:5.

²⁷Mark quotes from the Septuagint, *kurios ho theos emon kurios heis estin*. See Alfred Rahlfs, ed., *Septuaginta*, editio minor, Vol. 1 (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart, 1935), 297.

²⁸For example, “one flesh” in Matthew 19:5 and 1 Corinthians 6:16; “one body” in Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12, 30; and Ephesians 2:15; compare also 1 Corinthians 3:8; John 10:30; 17:11; and 17:21-23. See William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 1st ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 230.

²⁹Compare Deuteronomy 4:35, 39; Isaiah 43:10-11; and 44:6-8.

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According to Paul, two “ones” stand apart from the so-called rest. Two “ones” stand alone in their being, and these “ones” share the distinctiveness of the one “one.” Note the strong and almost identical confessional language about “God the Father” (*theos ho pater*) and “Lord Jesus Christ” (*kurios Iesous Christos*) in verse 6. As B. B. Warfield says, “The ‘one God the Father and one Lord Jesus Christ’ of the Christian is just the one only God which exists. To attempt to make it mean anything else is to stultify the whole argument. You cannot prove that only one God exists by pointing out that you yourself have two.”³⁰ Modalism denies this type of oneness that the apostle Paul affirms. Modalism obscures this mysterious unity by affirming a so-called unity.

Secondly, modalism denies biblical statements that ascribe plurality to the Godhead. In the Old Testament, Hebrew words like *elohim* and *adonai* as well as plural pronouns in reference to God (e.g., Genesis 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; and Isaiah 6:8) hint at differentiation.³¹ Perhaps more weighty evidence for differentiation in the Old Testament comes from passages that refer to “the

³⁰B. B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1968), 75-76. Compare J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul’s Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1925), 305-306. And, the statements by Gromacki, *The Virgin Birth: Doctrine of Deity*, are relevant: “Since God is one in His basic essence, how can He also be three? First, it must be pointed out that ‘one’ and ‘three’ are not being used in the same sense. The word ‘one’ applies only to the nature of the divine Being; there is only one God. The word ‘three’ refers to the three Persons or personal distinctions within the divine oneness.”

³¹“Hint” should be underscored. Alternate interpretations of the evidence are possible. For example, Kline explains the plural pronouns as God “addressing himself to the angelic council of elders.” Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 22. See too Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, 29-30, for more Old Testament phenomena of this sort.

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angel of the Lord.”³² At best, though, the language of the Old Testament is indefinite. Warfield remarks, “It is a plain matter of fact that none who have depended on the revelation embodied in the Old Testament alone have ever attained to the doctrine of the Trinity.”³³ But he goes on to admit the “development of the idea of God” in the Old Testament, that “the Deity is not a simple monad,” and he recognizes in Old Testament scriptures “the germ of the distinction in the Godhead” that the writers of the New Testament make plain.³⁴

What is cloudy about the Godhead in the Old Testament becomes clear in the New Testament. In the latter revelation, statements about the three-fold nature of the Godhead abound. Baptism is “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19, NIV). There is “one Spirit . . . one Lord . . . one God and Father . . .” (Ephesians 4:4-6, NIV). Christians are elected “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood” (1 Peter 1:2, NIV).³⁵ The co-status, distinction, and essential unity of Father, Son, and Spirit are affirmed, incidentally most of the time, as fact.

³²See James A. Borland, *Christ in the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1978), 34ff.; and Kline, *Images of the Spirit*, 70ff.

³³Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, 29.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 30.

³⁵See also Matthew 1:18-23; Luke 1:35; John 15:26; 1 Corinthians 6:11; 12:4-6; 2 Corinthians 1:21-22; 13:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:18-19; and 1 John 4:13-14.

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Modalists, however, do not deny the distinctions per se. They just deny that the distinctions are real. The differentiations are only “appearances” or “modes” or “faces” of the monad deity. But how can Christian devotion be expressed to the *Father*, and the *Son*, and the *Holy Spirit*, if the distinctions are not real? How can Father, Son, and Spirit *work together* and *at the same time* in the life of the Christian, if the distinctions are not real? How can there be *one* Father, *one* Son, and *one* Spirit, if the distinctions are not real?

In reply, the modalist affirms the economical revelation of the modes of God in history. Father, Son, and Spirit do not work simultaneously; they work successively and at different times in history. But this raises the third major difficulty with modalism. Such an economical trinitarianism forces wild and absurd interpretations on what could be called the “phenomena of interrelationship”³⁶ between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in the New Testament.

In Matthew 3:16-17,³⁷ when the Son ascended from the Jordan River after his baptism, the Spirit descended from heaven, and the Father announced his approval. The actions, according to the text, occurred simultaneously. Note the narrative of Luke, “As he [i.e., Jesus] was praying . . . the Holy Spirit descended . . . and a voice [i.e., the Father’s] came from heaven” (3:21-22, NIV). Who was baptized? Who descended from heaven? Who spoke from heaven? In this event, three modes existed at the same time in history. The modalist cannot consistently answer these questions. He is forced to accept either an ontological tri-modal Godhead, which is

³⁶This is Warfield’s expression, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, 39.

³⁷Compare Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32-34.

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the same as the orthodox position but differs only in terminology, or an adoptionist or subordinationist christology. Either way, the modalist concedes his modalism.

The same problem confronts the modalist in passages from John's gospel that talk about Jesus going to the Father and the Father and Jesus sending the Holy Spirit to the disciples (see John 14:16-17, 25-26; 15:26; and 16:7, 10). Who will come? From whom will he come? To whom will Jesus go? To deny distinctions in the Godhead makes the "going" of Jesus and the "coming" of the Holy Spirit senseless. If the Godhead is only one persona in disguise, then Jesus "goes" to heaven, "becomes" the Father, then "sends" himself back as the Holy Spirit. Such a view seems to make Jesus dishonest and deceptive, if he told his disciples about his departure and promised them "another helper" (*allon parakleton*), and then he himself returned to them *as that helper!*³⁸

Another glaring problem of the modalistic view involves the relationship of the Father and the Son.³⁹ This is especially true of the crucifixion narrative. When Jesus cried out, "*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*"—which means, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Matthew

³⁸A delicate balance between distinction and identity of persons must be preserved. Modalism distorts this balance. Warfield's comments, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, 40, highlight this balance: "The Father, Son, and Spirit are constantly distinguished from one another. . . . Yet the oneness of these three is so kept in sight, that the coming of this 'another Advocate' is spoken of without embarrassment as the coming of the Son Himself (vs. 18, 19, 20, 21), and indeed as the coming of the Father and the Son (ver. 23). There is a sense, then, in which, when Christ goes away, the Spirit comes in His stead; there is also a sense in which, when the Spirit comes, Christ comes in Him; and with Christ's coming the Father comes too."

³⁹See Matthew 11:27; Luke 10:22; John 8:42; 10:30; 13:3; 16:27, 28, 30; and 17:8.

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27:46, NIV),⁴⁰ to whom did he speak? Was he speaking to himself? If so, who died on the cross? The apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* recognizes this problem and translates the Aramaic expression, “My power, my power, you have forsaken me.”⁴¹ As Plummer notes:

This is followed by, “And when He had said it He was taken up.” This and other features in the fragment seem to show that the Gospel of Peter favoured the Gnostic view that the Divine Son of God was united to the human Son of Mary at His Baptism and departed from Him at the Crucifixion.⁴²

While differing in their starting-points, a consistent modalism must agree with the Gnostic christology. Either God the Son spoke to God the Father (e.g., the orthodox position), or the Godhead abandoned the human Jesus (e.g., adoptionism) and only a human Jesus died on the cross.⁴³ The only other conceivable alternative is a nonsensical one, that is, the incarnate Godhead spoke to himself. The Godhead suffered, forsook himself, and then died (e.g., patripassianism).

No, modalism is not a viable trinitarian concept. As Tertullian, the second century “Church Father” from Carthage, wrote:

⁴⁰See Mark 15:34; compare Luke 23:46.

⁴¹Quoted in Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (repr., Minneapolis, MN: James Family Christian Publishers, n.d.), 399.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Marvin A. Hicks amazingly affirms exactly this: “The Spirit is the deity, or Jehovah, that indwelt Christ. And the flesh is the Son, the human part that died. . . . When the Spirit forsook that flesh on the cross, and the flesh cried, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ . . . it was that the Father, or the Spirit, withdrew from the flesh, or the Son of God.” *Woods-Hicks Debate*, cassette recordings.

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The devil has striven against the truth in manifold ways. He has sometimes endeavored to destroy it by defending it. He champions the unity of God, the omnipotent creator of the world, only to make out of that unity a heresy. He says that the Father himself descended into the virgin, was himself born of her, himself suffered; in fact that he himself was Jesus Christ. . . . It was Praxeas who first brought this kind of perversity from Asia to Rome . . . he put the Paraclete to flight and crucified the Father.⁴⁴

So it is with modalism in its conception of God.

⁴⁴Quoted in Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 53.

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