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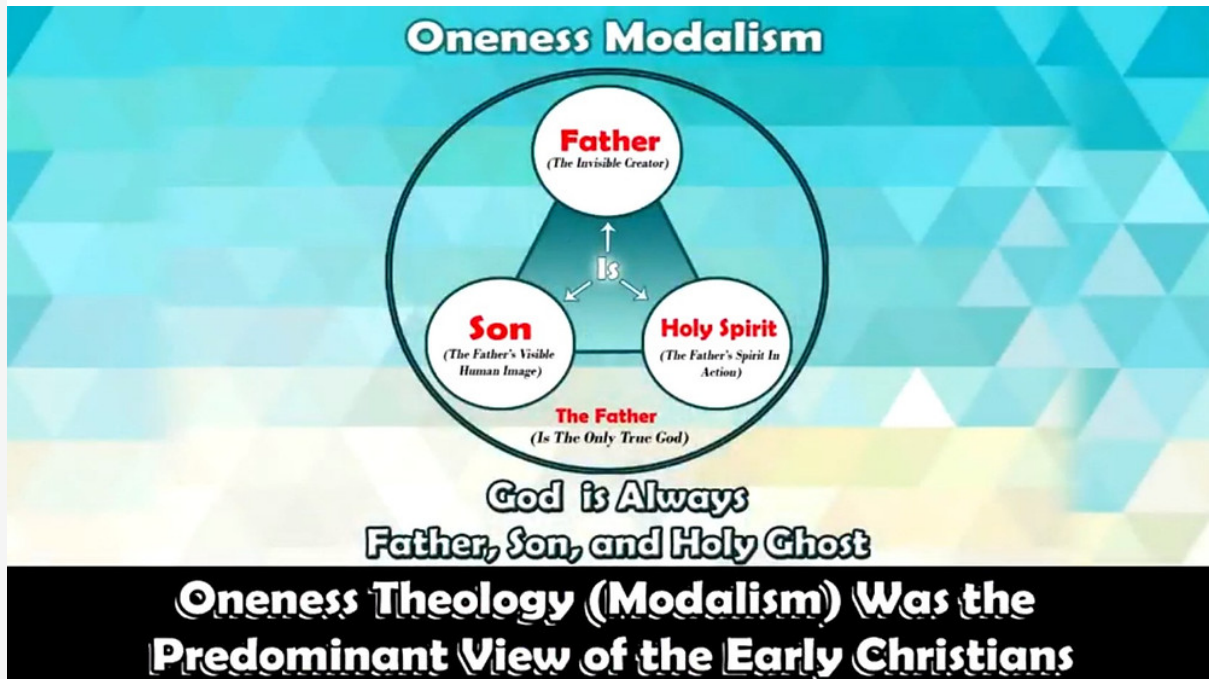
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Steven Ritchie · Aug 2, 2017 · 59 min read

Oneness Theology (Modalism) Was the Predominant View of the Early Christians



Oneness Modalism Was Once The Most Popular Christian Theology

The historical evidence proves that Oneness Modalistic Monarchianism was once the most popular Christian belief within the first three hundred years of Christian history and that the Trinitarian doctrine was not fully developed until well into the fifth century. Most Trinitarians falsely allege that the second and third century writers who believed in a pre-incarnate Son, or used the word "trinity" were all orthodox Trinitarians. Yet the writings of these men can at best be called "Semi-Trinitarian" because most of them denied the later Trinitarian doctrines of coequality and co-eternality of the Son. Wherefore, the real facts of early pre-Nicene Christian history prove that the majority of the earliest Post Apostolic Christians were Oneness in their theology [Modalistic Monarchian] and that the Oneness Modalists universally rejected the emerging Semi-Trinitarian and Semi-Arian teachings in the first few centuries.

In spite of the truth of the historical evidence, Trinitarian apologists often accuse Oneness apologists of revising and distorting the historical data. For example, Trinitarian author Edward Dalcour falsely accused Oneness authors Bernard and Chalfant of revising the "historical information." Edward Dalcour wrote, "To maintain the idea that the early church was Oneness is a complicated task for Oneness teachers, for in order to do so, Oneness teachers must revise history. For instance, Bernard claims: '1. As far as we can tell, the early church Christian leaders in the days immediately following the apostolic age were Oneness. It is certain they did not teach the doctrine of the trinity as it later developed and as it exists today. 2. Even after the emergence of the trinitarian doctrine ... the doctrine of the trinity did not replace Oneness as the dominant belief until around 300 A.D., and it did not become universally established until late in the fourth century.'" (*The Oneness of God*, David K. Bernard, Pg. 236-237 / cited in E. Dalcour's book, *A Definitive Look At Oneness Theology*, Pg. 170)

Mr. Dalcour commented, "Oneness teachers routinely practice this kind of historical revisionism in order to substantiate the notion that the early church taught distinctive Oneness doctrines. Bernard's assertion that the Trinity "did not replace Oneness as the dominant belief until around 300 A.D." is the very conclusion he has yet to establish." (*A Definitive Look At Oneness Theology*, Edward Dalcour, Pg. 170)

Although David Bernard has documented the historical evidence, I will document much more evidence in the next few chapters to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that it is Mr. Dalcour and other Trinitarians like him who are guilty of revising and distorting the historical evidence within the first three hundred years of the Christian era. Many Trinitarians are promulgating the idea that the majority of the earliest Christians were Trinitarian and not Oneness. Yet the solid facts of history prove that the opponents of the Modalists were not only in the minority within the first three hundred years of Christian history, but the vast majority of them were not even what modern Trinitarians would consider orthodox in that they denied the latter Trinitarian doctrines of co-eternality and coequality of the Son.

Modalism Was The Ancient Christian Theology

The famed Eastern Orthodox church historian, Jaroslav Pelikan, wrote that "Many of the passages in ancient Christian writers sound like Modalistic Monarchianism" (*The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition, Vol. 1, Pg. 177*). Then in the same paragraph (page 177) Pelikan cited Ignatius of Antioch (40-113 AD) and Melito of Sardis (130-180 AD) to show that their writings sounded "like Modalistic Monarchianism".

After citing Ignatius of Antioch and Melito of Sardis, Pelikan admitted that "**Modalistic Monarchianism ... turns out to have been a systematization of POPULAR Christian belief in ancient Christian theology (emphasis added):**" (*The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition Vol. I. – Page 179*)

If Trinitarian thought had been a "popular Christian belief in ancient Christian theology," we can be certain that Mr. Pelikan would have pointed it out to us. To the contrary, Pelikan (himself a Trinitarian historian) wrote that "Modalistic Monarchianism" was the "popular Christian belief" as the most "ancient Christian theology." Why would famous Trinitarian historians admit that "Modalistic Monarchianism" was the "popular Christian belief in ancient Christian theology" while never stating that the Trinitarian belief was "popular" in the early days of Christianity? I challenge all Trinitarians to read Jaroslav Pelikan's book, "The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition Vol. 1" and try to find a single line where Mr. Pelikan ever said that the Trinitarian belief the "popular Christian belief in ancient Christian theology." I read Mr. Pelikan's book, but I did not find anything to substantiate the false Trinitarian claim that the Trinity doctrine was the most popular Christian theology among the ancient Christians.

German Church historian Friedrich Loofs was a student of the renowned church historian Adolph Harnack. Loofs wrote, "... The Modalists were the successors to the apostles and not the Trinitarians. The Trinitarians expropriated the term 'catholic' (universal) from the writings of Ignatius. When they increased in power and in numbers, they branded the Modalists who preached one God as heretics, and styled their group as 'catholic'..." (*The History of the Primitive Church, translated into English by Ernest C. Messenger (London: Burns, Oates and Washburne Ltd., 1949) 3:600.*)

Trinitarian Protestant author Harold Brown wrote that it is impossible to find true theological orthodoxy within the first two hundred years of Christian history.

"It is impossible to document what we now call orthodoxy in the first two centuries of Christianity." (*Heresy and Orthodoxy – In the History of the Church, Pg. 5, Harold Brown*)

The context of Mr. Harold Brown's introduction to his book affirmed that there was no true Trinitarian orthodoxy within the first two centuries of the Christian era. Harold Brown was clearly addressing the theological orthodoxy regarding the Protestant idea of a Trinity. According to the Semi-Arian writers Tertullian and Origen, the Oneness Modalists were "always the majority" in the West (*Tertullian Against Praxeus 3*) and that the Oneness Modalists were "the general run of Christians" in the East (*Origen's Commentary of the Gospel of John, book 1, Chapter 23*).

I find it amazing that even though the opponents of the Modalists such as Tertullian and Origen who themselves confessed that the Modalists were "always the majority of the faithful" as "the general run of Christians," hard hearted Trinitarians continue to think they know more than those who actually lived during the second and third centuries. Since many Trinitarian scholars and historians have themselves admitted that the Modalists were the Christian "majority" before the Trinity developed, it really is shocking that Trinitarian authors like Edward Dalcour would revise the historical facts.

Dr. Dalcour actually wrote, "Oneness writers provide revised and disjointed historical information in order to convince the Oneness people that the early church fathers were modalists. Revising the historical record, William B. Chalfant makes these remarks:"

"The trinity doctrine exists only on paper ... No apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ ever taught such a doctrine ... None of the immediate disciples of the apostles (e.g., Clement, Ignatius, Hermas, or Polycarp) taught such a doctrine ... Who began such a teaching? ... Trinities abound in the ancient, false religions." (*Ancient Champions of Oneness. WB Chalfant, pg. 116-118; Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame, 1979 1979 / as cited in Edward Dalcour's book, A Definitive Look At Oneness Theology, Pg. 175*)

Edward Dalcour commented, "Here Chalfant assumes the conclusion he is wishing to reach, namely, that the early church fathers were modalists. With no objective historical justification provided, Oneness writers (e.g., Bernard 1991: 24, 264-65) engage frequently in this kind of patent historical revisionism. The foremost and most recognized Christian theologians and church historians strongly oppose the Oneness historical premise that 'the early church Christian leaders in the days immediately following the apostolic age were Oneness' (Bernard, 1983: 236) (*From A Definitive Look At Oneness Theology, Page 175, Edward Dalcour*)." Apparently, Mr. Dalcour has not extensively read "the foremost and most recognized Christian theologians and historians" within the past few hundred years because the foremost church historians acknowledge that the Oneness Modalists were numerically prominent in the early days of Christianity.

Church Historians Affirm The Predominance of Modalism

Adolph Harnack wrote that "Modalistic Monarchianism" was once "embraced by the great majority of all Christians" (*Adolph Harnack, History of Dogma, London: Williams & Norgate, 1897, III, 51-54*).

Trinitarian Historian John Henry Newman himself admitted that the majority of the third century Christians held to Oneness Modalistic theology.

"Sabellius, from whom the heresy has since taken its name. He was a bishop or presbyter in Pentapolis, a district of Cyrenaica, included within the territory afterwards called, and then virtually forming, the Alexandrian Patriarchate. Other bishops in his neighborhood adopting his sentiments, **his doctrine became so popular among a clergy already prepared for it**, or hitherto unpracticed in the necessity of a close adherence to the authorized formularies of faith, that in a short time (to use the words of Athanasius) 'the Son of God was scarcely preached in the Churches.'" (*Trinitarian Church Historian John Henry Newman's Book, Arians of the Fourth Century, Chapter 1, Section 5, under "Sabellianism"*)

If the Athanasian Trinitarian view of the Son of God was "scarcely preached in the churches," before the time of Athanasius, then the Sabellian view was predominant, and the Trinitarian view had to be "scarce."

Trinitarian Historian John Henry Newman clearly stated, "his doctrine (the context proves 'Sabellius') became so popular among a clergy already prepared for it, or hitherto unpracticed in the necessity of a close adherence to the authorized formularies of faith, that in a short time (to use the words of Athanasius) 'the Son of God was scarcely preached in the Churches.'

Now if the later early fourth-century Athanasian idea of the Son of God 'was scarcely preached in the Churches' then that would mean that the Trinitarian idea was 'scarce' and that the **Modalist idea was 'so popular among the clergy'** at that time. Thus, Trinitarian historian John Henry Newman actually admitted that the Modalists (Sabellians) were predominant within the third century and that the later Athanasian idea of the Son of God was 'scarcely preached in the Churches' before the time of Athanasius (early fourth century)." (*Trinitarian Church Historian John Henry Newman's Book, Arians of the Fourth Century, Chapter 1, Section 5, under "Sabellianism"*)

The context of John Henry Newman's book, chapter 1, Section 5A (Page 118), proves that the "speculations" of "Praxeus" (A prominent Modalistic Leader in the late second and early third century) "remained alive in that part of the world, though latent [Note 3 - Tertull. in Prax.], till they burst into a flame about the middle of the third century, at the eventful era when the rudiments of Arianism were laid by the sophistical school at Antioch (*Trinitarian Church Historian John Henry Newman's Book, Arians of the Fourth Century, Chapter 1, Section 5, under "Sabellianism"*)." If "the speculations of Praxeus remained alive," in the hearts and minds of the early Christians, then these early Christians must have believed a lot like the Modalistic Monarchian teaching of Praxeus. For how could the speculations of Praxeus have "remained alive" within the early Christians if they had been true Trinitarians in their thinking?

The historical record indicates that Arians and Semi-Arians condemned Sabellian Modalism in Antioch in about 264-272 A.D. by condemning the Modalistic Monarchian belief that Jesus is the same **homoousios**, "of the same substance" as the Father. The Modalists were teaching that Jesus is the same substance or essence of being as the Father long before the Council of Nicaea while the Semi-Arians were teaching that Jesus is homoiousios, "of a similar substance", but different from the Father. In fact, Semi-Arians such as Origen and Hippolytus were teaching that Jesus was a different "homoiousios" - "substance" or "essence of being" from the Father in opposition to the Modalists long before Nicaea.

Under **Homoousion**, the New Advent Encyclopedia says, "Origen, who is, however, inconsistent in his vocabulary, expressed the anti-Sabellian sense of Dionysius of Alexandria by calling the Son 'Heteroousion.' The question was brought into discussion by the Council of Antioch (264-272); and the Fathers seem to have rejected Homoousion ('same substance'), even going so far as to propose the phrase heteras ousias, that is, Heteroousion, 'of other or different ousia' ('different substance' from the Father)."

Here we have documented evidence to prove that the Oneness Modalists were teaching that the Father and the Son are of the same "substance" or "essence" long before the Council of Nicaea convened in 325. The pre-Nicene Semi-Arian minority were teaching that the Father and the Son are distinct in that they have a different "substance" or "essence" apart from each other (an Arian anti-Nicene theology) while the Modalists were teaching that the Father and the Son are of the same "substance" (a pro-Nicene theology). Therefore the Oneness Modalists were teaching Nicene orthodoxy long before the Council of Nicaea convened in the early fourth century.

There can be no doubt that the Modalists were the Christian majority in the early days of Christianity while the Semi-Arians grew into the second largest group after the Modalists. The emerging Trinitarian thought of men like Athanasius "was scarcely preached in the churches" before the time of Athanasius in the early fourth century (*Trinitarian Church Historian John Henry Newman's Book, Arians of the Fourth Century, Chapter 1, Section 5, under "Sabellianism"*). Therefore, Trinitarians cannot claim that their theological view was ever prominent before the fourth and fifth centuries.

Modalistic Monarchian Theology vs. Semi-Arian Theology

At 5:05 into the Christian Answers Part 5 Lecture on Early Christian History, Mr. Morrison said, "**Jesus was in heaven FROM AGES PAST** (<https://youtu.be/t7gvebeL3AM>)." Mr. Morrison was referencing the belief of the pre-Nicene Semi Arians when he said, "from ages past" rather than "from eternity past" because not a single early Christian writer before Origen (3rd century) ever taught an eternal Son. In contradistinction to the Semi Arians, Modalists such as Ignatius of Antioch (107 AD) taught that the timeless invisible God became visible via virgin conception and birth as the Son, but no one taught that an alleged timeless Son could be timelessly visible as a Son until the time of Origen (3rd century).

In about 107 AD, Ignatius wrote to Polycarp, "Look for Him who is above all time, THE TIMELESS, THE INVISIBLE, WHO FOR OUR SAKE BECAME VISIBLE ..." (*Ignatius' Epistle to Polycarp 3:2*)

Trinitarian theologians often state that the Son was seen in the visible form of God before his virgin conception while God the Father cannot be seen. Thus modern Trinitarians and Jehovah's Witnesses are teaching the same theology as the pre-Nicene Semi-Arians in that the Son was seen as an angel before the incarnation ("*Therefore neither Abraham, nor Isaac, nor Jacob, nor any other man, saw the Father and ineffable Lord of all, and also of Christ, but [saw] Him who was according to His will His Son, being God, and the Angel because He ministered to His will...*" – Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 127 / "*God begat before all creatures a Beginning, a certain Reasonable Power from Himself, who is called by the Holy Spirit, now the Glory of the Lord, now the Son, again Wisdom, again an Angel, then God, and then Lord and Logos...*" – Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 61)

Yet Ignatius, who lived before the Semi-Arians (40-107 AD), had taught that the timeless God was invisible before becoming visible via virgin conception and birth. Therefore the earliest Christian witness (predating Arianism and Trinitarianism) did not believe in the later Semi-Arian and Trinitarian view that the Son could be seen as an angel in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Origen of Alexandria (202-253 AD) gave us an important clue to what the early Oneness Modalists had taught (*Origen identified them as "the general run of Christians" in the early to mid-third century*) about the word (logos) being the impersonal utterances of the Father deposited in words until the child was actually born as a son (Luke 1:35; Matthew 1:20) later on in time. In his Commentary on the Gospel of John, Book 1, Chapter 23, Origen wrote,

"I wonder at the stupidity of **THE GENERAL RUN OF CHRISTIANS** (the Christian majority) in this matter. I do not mince matters; it is nothing but stupidity ... they proceed differently and ask, **WHAT IS THE SON OF GOD WHEN CALLED THE WORD?** The passage they employ is that in the Psalms, 'My heart has produced a good word;' **AND THEY IMAGINE THE SON TO BE THE UTTERANCE OF THE FATHER DEPOSITED**, as it were, in syllables ... **THEY DO NOT ALLOW HIM ... ANY INDEPENDENT HYPOSTASIS (Substance of Being)**, nor are they clear about His essence. I do not mean that they confuse its qualities, but the fact of His having **AN ESSENCE OF HIS OWN** (*Origen's Commentary of the Gospel of John, book 1, chapter 23*)."

Trinitarian historians readily admit that Origen's Commentary of the Gospel of John, book 1, chapter 23, is addressing the Modalistic Monarchians as "the general run of Christians" who rejected the Semi-Arian belief about the logos being a distinct god person with a difference "essence of his own," apart from the Father. Author Andrew Radde Gallwitz cited Trinitarian church historian Ronald E. Hein to show that Origen wrote the first portion of his Commentary on the Gospel of John (books 1 and 2) against the Modalists after being rejected as a heretic by the Modalistic Christian majority in Rome.

"The first two books [of the Commentary on John] were written soon after Origen returned from Rome, and are largely structured by the modalist question ... the modalist problem appears several times in his exegetical comments on John 1:1-5, and appears to have been much on his mind."

Andrew Radde Gallwitz wrote that "Origen became particularly sensitive to modalists who denied **the separate hypostatic existence of the Son and the Spirit** during his visit to Rome during the episcopacy of Zephyrinus (*bishop AD 198-217*). Thus, despite the fact that in the Commentary on John, the most obvious adversary is the 'Valentinian' teacher Heracleon, Origen also spends a considerable amount of time arguing against modalists, which leads him to insist on the distinct, substantial reality of Son and Spirit. In his Commentary on John 2, Origen (wrote)... **'the Spirit is made through the Son** (as are 'all things,' accor