

Terms Relative to the Patristic Period

In the Evolution of the Trinity Doctrine

INTRODUCTION

One of the most debated theological issues in the early Christian church was the doctrine of the Trinity. How can there only be one God, but three in persons?

It was during the time-period following the death of the Apostle John c 98 A.D. when many Gentiles (Greeks) were attracted to Christianity. A group of men who were Greek philosophers with pagan backgrounds never laid down their Greek cloaks, merged their Greek philosophy with Christianity. These men who later became known as the Church Fathers (*the word Father is from the Latin word "Papa"*) formed the trinity doctrine using their Greek philosophy and pagan background. They incorporated their Greek terminology in defining the Godhead. These were Greek and Latin philosophers and theologians.

Those who wrote in Greek are called the Greek Church Fathers. Such men as; Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, The Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Peter of Sebaste, Maximus the Confessor, and John of Damascus.

Among the Latin Fathers are Tertullian, Cyprian, Jerome, Ambrose of Milan, Gregory the Great and Augustine of Hippo.

This time-period following the death of the Apostle John who was the last living Apostle is known as **the Patristic period**.

The Patristic period was the period between the 2nd century BC and the 8th century, (100 AD-451 A.D.).

The following are various terms, terminology, language introduced during this Patristic period when the trinity doctrine was introduced.

Students should become familiar with these terms and language associated with the study of the trinity doctrine.

Terminology

1. Monarchianism

Defined: “Monarchianism” (mono–“one”; arche–“rule”)

Monarchianism is a Christian theology that emphasizes God as one indivisible being, in direct contrast to Trinitarianism, which defines the Godhead as three coeternal, consubstantial, co-immanent, and equally divine hypostases.

Monarchianism had two primary forms.

- **Dynamic Monarchianism** is the view that Jesus was not in His nature God. It is the view that God existed in Jesus, just as God exist in all of us – but that God existed in Jesus in a particularly powerful way. Jesus was God because God inhabited Him.
- **Modalistic Monarchianism**, also known as **Modalism**, is the view that God variously manifested Himself as the Father (Primarily in the Old Testament), other times as the Son (Primarily from Jesus’ conception to His ascension), and other times as the Holy Spirit (primarily after Jesus’ ascension into Heaven).

God is not three persons, rather Modalistic Monarchianism/ Modalism teaches that God has simply revealed Himself in three different modes.

- ### 2. Sabellianism:
- Sabellianism, named after Sabellius, an influential early proponent of Modalistic Monarchianism or Modalsim. God is not three persons, rather God has simply revealed Himself in three different modes as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Other early proponents of modalism in the early church was. . .

- **Noetus** a presbyter of the church of Asia Minor about AD 230
- **Praxas** was a Monarchian from Asia Minor who lived in the end of the 2nd century/beginning of the 3rd century. He believed in the unity of the Godhead and vehemently disagreed with any attempt at division of the personalities or personages of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Christian Church.

- ### 3. Patripassianism:
- Another aspect of Modalistic Monarchianism, Modalism, Sabellianism, is **Patripassianism**, which is the view that it was God the Father who became incarnate, suffered, died, and was resurrected. Patripassianism essentially teaches that God the Father became His own Son.

Those who hold to a oneness position on the Godhead are called by Trinitarians as **Modalist**. The term **Modalism** has been attached to the Oneness doctrine (teaching).

Many Pentecostal Oneness claim Modalism as the basis of their position on the Godhead. This has caused much controversy and mis-interpretation.

From this teaching on Modalism, Trinitarians accuse Modalism as being Patripassianism, the view that it was God the Father who became incarnate, suffered, died, and was resurrected. Patripassianism essentially teaches that God the Father became His own Son. They claim that when Jesus died on the cross, that the Father died. This is called “ Father Sufferer”.

This is false statement and accusations made by trinitarians. The Oneness doctrine **DOES NOT** believe or teach such doctrine.

Other Terms used by Trinitarians:

- 4. Hypostasis:** *Hypostasis* (or the Latin ‘*Persona*’) is an approximate equivalent of “person”. The Trinity teaches that God is three . The Trinity teaches that God is three *hypostases* (three persons).

Nowhere in Scripture does the Greek word *Hypostasis* appear in reference to God being three Hypostasis.

- 5. Ousia:** Trinity uses this term as “Essence” or “Substance”.

STRONGS NT 3776: οὐσία, οὐσίας, ἡ (from ὄν, οὔσα, ὄν, the participle of εἰμί), **what one has**, i.e. **property, possessions, estate** (A. V. **substance**): [Luke 15:12](#)

The word ousia is used in the New Testament **only in relation to the substance in the sense of goods**, twice in the parable of the Prodigal Son where the son asked his father to divide to him his inheritance, and then wasted it on riotous living.

- 6. Homoousios:** This term does not appears nowhere in the New Testament. Trinitarians use this term to mean (“one of essence” or one of substance”) which is historically the key term in trinitarianism because it is this term or its concept that supposedly makes trinitarianism “monotheistic”.

These terms are terms and language not used in scripture but was introduced by the so-called church fathers during the patristic period following the death of the Apostles.

These terms are not found used in the early Apostolic Church.