

HERESIES IN THE EARLY CHURCH AND THE RISE OF ORTHODOXY

Damon Rambo
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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Gnosticism	2
Proponents	3
Opponents	3
Contributions to Orthodoxy	4
Modalistic Monarchianism	5
Proponents	6
Opponents	7
Contributions to Orthodoxy	7
Arianism	8
Proponents	9
Opponents	11
Contributions to Orthodoxy	11
Conclusion	11
Bibliography	12

INTRODUCTION

For many in the church today, “heresy” is a dirty word. In this modern pluralistic, relativistic society, the idea of leveling so great a judgment upon the beliefs of others seems somehow inherently wrong, and even perhaps unchristian. Society at large holds to a belief that everyone should be unquestionably accepting of others’ beliefs, regardless of how ridiculous or unfounded those beliefs might be.

But the men and women of the early church had no such qualms. They were quick to stand up for what they believed in, and just as quick to decry the outrageous and unorthodox beliefs of others. The great Latin father Tertullian, for instance, touting Scripture, stated that a heretic should be “rejected after the first admonition”.¹ It is this kind of intolerance for heresy and passion for correct doctrine, biblical doctrine in particular, which led to the delineating of what is called “orthodoxy” today.

This development is precisely what will be examined in the following pages. Each of these early heresies shall be explored, both structurally and historically. It will then be shown in what way the refutation of each of these unusual and unbiblical beliefs helped to define the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy.

It must be noted that this work is in no way exhaustive: there are many other heresies which could be explored. However these three particular subjects, Gnosticism, Arianism and Modalistic Monarchianism, have been chosen for the impact which they had upon a specific area of Christianity.

¹ Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson and Cleveland A. Coxe: *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. III: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*. (Oak Harbor : Logos Research Systems, 1997), S. 245

GNOSTICISM

Perhaps one of the most pervasive heresies which resided both within and without the church was the Gnostic heresy. Gnosticism, at least the version dealt with here, is an amalgam of Christianity and Greek philosophy which reflects a strange kind of vertical dualism. Basically it teaches that the good God “emanated”, or gave birth to, a pair of lesser deities. These deities emanated still lower deities, which emanated lower deities still. This series of emanations finally culminated in the lowest of deities, Sophia, and her consort.²

Sophia, according to this group of Gnostics, was unhappy with her consort however, desiring instead the ultimate God. Such a desire was simply unacceptable, so it was stripped away from her and cast out of the heavenly realm, where it became what is known as the “demiurge”. This demiurge is equated in Gnosticism with “Yahweh” of the Old Testament; it was therefore the demiurge, not the true God that created the world. Related to this is the Gnostic idea that matter is inherently evil.³

In this system Jesus himself is not seen as a savior per se, but instead he is an imparter of divine, secret knowledge. The Greek word “gnosis” from which the term “Gnostic” is derived, means exactly that: “knowledge”.⁴ This impartation of secret knowledge was Jesus’ true salvific work here on earth according to Gnostics; this is one of the prime reasons that this belief was labeled heresy.

² G.L. Borchert. “Gnosticism” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology 2nd ed.* Walter Elwell ed.(Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 486.

³ Borchert, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology 2nd ed.*, 486-487.

⁴ Barclay Moon Newman. *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament.* (Stuttgart, Germany : Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; United Bible Societies, 1993), S. 38.

Proponents

Not much is known of the early proponents of Gnosticism, and the little that is known, is primarily from early writers who are denouncing Gnostic beliefs. It is known from Eusebius of Caesarea, for instance, that they were somewhat prolific. Speaking of those who held to the “knowledge falsely so-called”, Eusebius stated that after the death of the apostles this “league of godless error took its rise.”⁵

The most notable person in this “league” was a man named Valentinus, an early Gnostic theologian of the first century. Valentinus, a former candidate for bishop, was apparently very successful at promoting his particular brand of Gnosticism, for he founded his own group, and even started a school in Rome. Tertullian, a fierce opponent of the Gnostic heresy, notes that he was an “able but restless man”.⁶

Other proponents of Gnosticism included Saturninus (or Saturnilus) of Antioch, and Basilides of Egypt. Little is known of these men, although Valentinus’ Gnostic tenets seem to come from, or at least parallel much of the teachings of Basilides, according to Ireneaus.⁷

Opponents

Standing against the teachings of Gnosticism was a veritable “who’s who” of church fathers. Men like Hippolytus, Epiphanius, and the aforementioned Tertullian wrote scathing attacks against these subversive, anti-Christian beliefs.

⁵ Eusebius. *Ecclesiastical History* online ed. New Advent, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2501.htm>., 3:32 ¶8. Emphasis added.

⁶ Roberts, Donaldson and Coxe: *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. III: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, S. 505.

⁷ Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds. *Documents of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford, 1999), 39.

It was Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, who wrote one of the finest and most well known refutations of the Gnostic heresy. In his *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies), he gives a detailed and well structured argument against the Gnostics. Although his arguments are many, the one that especially sticks out is his claim of apostolic succession. Irenaeus says that the concepts espoused by these Gnostics were completely foreign ideas to the apostles. Supporting this statement, he appeals to the tradition that had been handed down when he says:

It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times; those who neither taught nor knew of anything like what these [heretics] rave about.⁸

Though the threat presented by Gnosticism was great, the men who defended the Christian faith were up to the challenge. And even considering the detrimental effect the Gnostic heresy had on some, it also did much to contribute to the advance of an orthodox set of beliefs.

Contribution to Orthodoxy

Arguably the most important contribution that Gnosticism made to help define the orthodox faith was that it pushed the church to develop the universally accepted canon of scripture. The Gnostics had come up with their own apocryphal books, such as the “Gospel of Thomas”, which claimed to present “true” Christian beliefs. These writings were obviously not inspired, according to the Church Fathers. Because of this, they set out to mark the boundaries as to what *was* scripture. By the middle of the fourth century, they had done just that.⁹

⁸Roberts, Donaldson and Coxe. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. I: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, S. 415.

⁹Justo L. Gonzales. *The Story of Christianity Volume I*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), 62-63.

MODALISTIC MONARCHIANISM

Unlike the controversies surrounding Gnosticism, Modalism was almost exclusively a heresy found within the church itself. From around the turn of the third century, Christians began debating the relationship between the Son Jesus Christ, and the Father. As with many later heresies, problems arose when some drifted too far to one extreme or the other.

Modalistic Monarchianism was in some ways a reaction *to* the radical dualism of Gnosticism. Because the Gnostics claimed there were in essence multiple deities, the Christians of the time felt strongly influenced to affirm the monotheism taught in scripture. There was not some long chain of emanations coming from one God; Deuteronomy 6:4 clearly proclaims, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one”. Some simply went too far.¹⁰

This stressing of the “oneness” of God led some to fall into what is known as Modalistic Monarchianism, or “Modalism”. Modalism holds to the oneness of God, at the expense of the separation of persons within the Godhead. It teaches that sometimes God operates as God the Father, sometimes he operates as God the Son, and sometimes he operates as God the Holy Spirit. Not only is there one God, but only one person within the Godhead, who simply operates in different modes; in other words, it is as if he is putting on different masks.¹¹

This method of interpretation may have solved some apparent problems, but it presented many theological problems as well. What does the theologian do with verses such as Matthew 3:16-17, where God is shown in three different ways at the same time: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? It is because of these verses that sides in this dispute were quickly drawn, and vigorously defended.

¹⁰ W.H.C. Frend *The Rise of Christianity*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 343.

¹¹ C. Blaising. “Monarchianism” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology 2nd ed.*, 784-785.

Proponents

So who was it that taught this heresy? It is interesting that although Modalism has taken the name “Sabellianism” after the third century man of the same name, in actuality this doctrine originated with a man named Noetus according to Hippolytus. Noetus was a native of Smyrna, and a presbyter of the Church of Asia Minor.¹² Hippolytus, in his treatise *Refutation of all Heresies*, quotes Noetus as stating that, “When indeed, then, the Father had not been born, He yet was justly styled Father; and when it pleased Him to undergo generation, having been begotten, He Himself became His own Son, not another's.”¹³ This is clearly teaching the singular personhood of God.

Another notable proponent of Modalism was a man named Praxeas. This is another rather vague figure, but there are some things which are known of him. He was one of the well respected “confessors”; Christians who had undergone torture by the Roman authorities and had not denied Christ. Because of this, Praxeas apparently had enough influence with the Bishop of Rome to have him withdraw support for the Montanists, with whom Tertullian was affiliated.¹⁴

Lastly there is Sabellius. A fiercely opposed man and possibly a Presbyter of the city of Rome, Sabellius denied the Trinitarian nature of God. For his heresy, he was excommunicated by Calixtus I, bishop of Rome c. 215- c. 220.¹⁵

¹² Hippolytus. *Refutation of all Heresies*. (online ed. New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050109.htm>), 9:2.

¹³ Hippolytus *Refutation of all Heresies*, 9:5.

¹⁴ Roberts, Donaldson and Coxe: *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. III: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, S. 597.

¹⁵ (2009). In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. “**Sabellius**.” Retrieved October 03, 2009, from Encyclopedia Britannica Online: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/515010/Sabellius>

Opponents

Many of the opponents of this heresy have already been mentioned. Men like Hippolytus, Epiphanius, and most notably, Tertullian. Tertullian referred to Modalism as “Patripassianism”, meaning the “Father suffered”.¹⁶ He blasted the Monarchians for “placing the Father on the cross.” Writing with an unbelievable passion in his work *Against Praxeas*, Tertullian trumpets, “Silence! Silence on such blasphemy. Let us be content with saying that Christ died, the Son of the Father; and *let this suffice*, because the Scriptures have told us so much.”¹⁷

To be fair, Tertullian had a bit of an axe to grind with Praxeas, and this may well have influenced his writings. As mentioned in the preceding section, Praxeas had influenced Rome against the Montanists, something that Tertullian surely did not appreciate. Writing in *Against Praxeas* he laments that “By this Praxeas did a twofold service for the devil at Rome: he drove away prophecy, and he brought in heresy; he put to flight the Paraclete, and he crucified the Father.”¹⁸

Contribution to Orthodoxy

Regardless of his motivation, Tertullian’s defense of biblical doctrine provided one of the greatest contributions to the development of orthodox doctrine. It was the expression of a clear theological and Biblical definition of the nature of God, and the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Even while Tertullian was lashing out at those who would propagate this “Patripassianism”, he expressed the well known Trinitarian formula of “One substance in three persons”; a direct result of this heated debate.¹⁹

¹⁶ Roberts, Donaldson and Coxe: *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. III: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, S. 605.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, S.625.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, S597.

¹⁹ Gonzales. *The Story of Christianity Volume I*,77.

ARIANISM

The early centuries of the church were full of controversy and infighting. Debates raged, and heretics were declared. Excommunication was utilized, accusations flew, and even political positioning was prevalent. It was within this milieu of bickering and anger that the controversy over the deity of Christ arose.

In some ways this issue was never resolved. Centuries after this debate, many still held to an essentially Arian position. In fact, it lives on even today, within the group known as the “Jehovah’s Witnesses” or alternately the “Watchtower Society”. There is still a battle being fought over the deity of Christ, although those who hold to the Arian heresy are now by far in the minority. The teachings which are spread by these unorthodox men are not newly revealed truths, as they might claim, but long since disproven heresies.

Arianism, stated simply, is the belief that Jesus Christ and God the Father are not the same in person or substance. Only God the Father is true God; Jesus is a created being, a demigod if you will. He is the first and greatest created being, through whom God the Father created everything else.²⁰

Much like Modalism, Arianism was and is an attempt to maintain the monotheistic nature of God. And just like the supporters of Modalism, the proponents of Arianism overstepped the bounds of orthodoxy and Scripture.²¹

Proponents

It is surely a fact that the most well known and prolific proponent of Arianism, is the teaching’s namesake, Arius. Arius was born ca. 250, possibly in Libya. A pupil of Lucien of Antioch, Arius was eventually conferred the title of deacon in Alexandria. After being

²⁰ Millard J. Erickson. *Christian Theology*. (Grand Rapids; Baker, 2007), 712.

²¹ Ibid.

excommunicated for associating with the Melitians (a group who had been ejected from the church for causing disturbance), Arius was soon reinstated by Bishop Achillas in 311, and made a priest at the church of Baucalis.²²

Unlike some of the less well known heretics of the early church, quite a bit of Arius' writings have survived in one form or another to the present day. We know, for instance, that Arius truly believed and taught that there was a "time when he [Christ] was not", a phrase popularly attributed to Arius. In a surviving letter that he wrote to Eusebius of Nicomedia, he states clearly that "Before he was begotten, or created, or defined, or established, he did not exist."²³

Arius garnered a large number of supporters, particularly among the lay people. He was apparently so well liked, and his doctrine so well received, that there were crowds of people chanting his slogans on the street. Even bishops, writing in support of Arius, declared his beliefs correct and those of Bishop Alexander and Arius' detractors to be heresy.

Such support was not to last, however. So great was the controversy arising from Arius' doctrine, that eventually Emperor Constantine himself would become involved.²⁴

Opponents

There were many great men who joined the fray in attacking the theology of Arius. Bishop Alexander, for instance, fought long and hard against the teaching that the son was a created being, saying that Arius' 'son' could neither create, nor redeem.²⁵

²² V.L. Walter "Arius and Arianism," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* ed. Walter Elwell. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 95.

²³ Arius. "Letter of Arius to Eusebius of Nicomedia". Online edition, as found in Theodoret's *Church History* <http://www.fourthcentury.com/index.php/urkunde-1> accessed October 6, 2009, S. 5.

²⁴ Gonzales, 162.

²⁵ Frend, 494.

The two most important figures, though, are most likely Emperor Constantine himself, and Athanasius. Constantine, the “First Christian Emperor” of Rome, wanted to use Christianity as a binding force in his empire. The great theological debates, constant bickering, and endless accusations of heresy did not serve to promote this end. He therefore called the Council of Nicaea in 325, which would eventually condemn Arius and his teachings.²⁶

Athanasius provided the theological defense against Arius, declaring the beliefs of Arius to be “repulsive and most irreligious”.²⁷ In *Against the Arians*, a very spirited and able defense of the Holy Scriptures, Athanasius denies that the Son was created, affirming his eternally begotten state, as well affirming his oneness with the Father by pointing to John 14:8-9.²⁸

As mentioned in a previous paragraph, Arius’ teachings were condemned at the Council of Nicaea in 325. This had far reaching implications in the development of ecclesiastical doctrine.

Contribution to Orthodoxy

Thanks to the Arian controversy, the church developed a thorough theological understanding of the nature of the Godhead, as well as helping to promote an understanding of the Son specifically. It was from the Council of Nicaea, sparked by this debate, from which the orthodox doctrinal affirmation that Jesus Christ is “begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father”, came.²⁹

²⁶ Gonzales, 162-164.

²⁷ Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, online ed. New Advent <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/28161.htm> accessed October 6, 2009, 2.5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.12.

²⁹ Gonzales, 165.

CONCLUSION

Although the early church faced challenges from outside and inside, each of these were used by God to further the growth and development of his church. Each time a doctrine was promoted which stepped out of the bounds of scripture, devoted men and women rose to defend orthodoxy. This ongoing chain of challenge and response developed increasingly exact theological teachings. Thanks to the devoted, God-fearing men who defended the faith, the church today not only possesses biblical doctrine, it also has a rich theological well of knowledge upon which it can draw when it faces similar challenges.

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