

Sabellianism and the Trinity Doctrine: A Historical and Apologetic Review

Hendij Ofian Tololiu

Master of Theology Program, Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Kharisma, Indonesia

Article History

Received : 15 June 2026
Revised : 30 June 2026
Accepted : 16 July 2026
Published : 27 July 2026

Corresponding author*:

Hendij Ofian Tololiu

Contact:

lovehendyt@yahoo.co.id

Cite This Article:

Tololiu, H. O. (2026). Sabellianism and the Trinity Doctrine: A Historical and Apologetic Review. *Jurnal Ilmiah Multidisiplin*, 5(04), 95–99.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.56127/jukim.v5i04.2937>

Abstract: Sabellianism, also known as Modalistic Monarchianism, emerged during the third century as an attempt to preserve the absolute unity of God. However, this teaching was later rejected by the early Christian Church because it interpreted the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit merely as different modes or manifestations of one divine Person rather than three distinct and eternal Persons. This study aims to examine the historical background and principal teachings of Sabellianism and to compare them with the doctrine of the Trinity from historical, biblical, and apologetic perspectives. The study employed a qualitative library research method using a descriptive-analytical and comparative approach. Primary sources included biblical texts and the writings of the early Church Fathers, while secondary sources consisted of theological, historical, and apologetic literature. The analysis demonstrates that Sabellianism is inconsistent with the biblical testimony concerning the eternal relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The baptism of Jesus, the Great Commission, and other biblical passages consistently affirm the coexistence and distinction of the three divine Persons while maintaining the unity of the divine essence. Historically, the early Church rejected Sabellianism and affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity through the formulations of the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. This study concludes that the doctrine of the Trinity provides the most coherent theological framework for understanding the biblical revelation of God and serves as an essential foundation for Christian apologetics in explaining and defending the Christian faith.

Keywords: Sabellianism, Trinity, Modalistic Monarchianism, Church History, Christian Apologetics.

INTRODUCTION

The nature and self-revelation of God constitute one of the most fundamental discussions in Christian theology. From the second to the third century, the early Church encountered various interpretations that attempted to explain the relationship among God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. These debates emerged from the need to preserve belief in the unity of God while simultaneously affirming the divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit as revealed in Scripture. The development of early Christian doctrine therefore involved a continuous effort to formulate theological language capable of expressing both divine unity and personal distinction within the Godhead (Gonzalez, 2004; Kelly, 2008; Placher, 2006).

One influential interpretation arising from this theological context was Sabellianism, also known as Modalistic Monarchianism. This teaching was associated with Sabellius, a theologian from North Africa who was active during the early third century. Sabellianism emphasized the absolute monarchy and unity of God by maintaining that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were not three eternal and distinct Persons, but three modes, manifestations, or roles of one divine Person. God was understood to appear as the Father in creation, as the Son in redemption, and as the Holy Spirit in sanctification. Although this interpretation sought to protect Christian monotheism, it ultimately eliminated the eternal distinction and relationship among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Bavinck, 2010; Erickson, 2009; Kelly, 2008).

The early Church rejected Sabellianism because it was considered inconsistent with the biblical testimony concerning the simultaneous presence and interpersonal relationship of the three divine Persons. Biblical accounts such as the baptism of Jesus, Christ's prayers to the Father, the sending of the Son by the Father, and the Trinitarian baptismal formula demonstrate both the unity of God and the real distinction among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Early Church thinkers, including Tertullian and Hippolytus, argued that modalism could not adequately explain these passages because it reduced the relationship among the divine Persons to temporary functions or manifestations. The theological response to such teachings contributed to the development of the Church's formulation that God is one in essence and three in Persons (Campenhausen, 1995; Tertullian, 1993; Warfield, 2012).

The doctrine of the Trinity is therefore essential not only as a historical formulation but also as a foundation for Christian apologetics. It affirms that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are eternal, equal, and distinct Persons who share one undivided divine essence. A proper understanding of this doctrine enables Christians to respond to interpretations that oversimplify the nature of God and to explain the biblical basis of Trinitarian faith more accurately (Augustine of Hippo, 2001; Geisler, 2013). Accordingly, this study aims to examine the historical origin and principal teachings of Sabellianism, analyze the responses of the early Church and biblical testimony, and clarify the apologetic distinction between Sabellianism and the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative library research design using descriptive-analytical and comparative approaches. The research focused on examining the historical development and principal teachings of Sabellianism and comparing them with the doctrine of the Trinity. The descriptive approach was used to present the historical background, central concepts, and theological development of Sabellianism, while the analytical approach was applied to evaluate its theological and biblical implications. The comparative approach was used to identify the fundamental differences between Sabellianism and the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.

The data were obtained from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consisted of biblical passages and writings of the early Church Fathers, particularly Tertullian's criticism of Modalistic Monarchianism in *Against Praxeas* (Tertullian, 1993). The biblical texts analyzed included passages concerning the baptism of Jesus, the Great Commission, the relationship between the Father and the Son, and the Trinitarian formulation in the New Testament. Secondary sources consisted of books on systematic theology, early Christian doctrine, Church history, and Christian apologetics, including the works of Gonzalez (2004), Kelly (2008), Erickson (2009), Bavinck (2010), Warfield (2012), and Geisler (2013).

The data collection process was conducted through documentation and systematic reading of the selected literature. Relevant information was classified into several themes, including the historical origin of Sabellianism, its principal teachings, the responses of the early Church, biblical testimony concerning the

Trinity, and its apologetic implications. The collected data were then analyzed through content analysis by identifying, interpreting, and synthesizing the main theological arguments contained in the sources. The findings were subsequently compared to determine whether Sabellianism was consistent with the biblical testimony and the doctrinal formulation of the Trinity developed by the early Church (Campenhausen, 1995; Kelly, 2008; Placher, 2006).

The validity of the analysis was maintained by comparing information from multiple historical, theological, and biblical sources. This process enabled the study to avoid relying on a single interpretation and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the theological differences between Sabellianism and the doctrine of the Trinity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Historical Background of Sabellianism

Sabellianism emerged during the third century AD as one of the earliest theological attempts to preserve the absolute unity of God amid doctrinal debates concerning the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The teaching is attributed to Sabellius, who argued that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were not three distinct and eternal Persons but different manifestations of the one God in the history of salvation. According to this view, God revealed Himself as the Father in creation, as the Son in redemption, and as the Holy Spirit in sanctification. Consequently, the three divine names represented different modes of divine activity rather than distinct Persons existing simultaneously (Gonzalez, 2004; Kelly, 2008).

The emergence of Sabellianism reflected the theological struggle of the early Church to uphold biblical monotheism while acknowledging the full divinity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. During this period, Christian theologians sought to articulate the relationship between divine unity and plurality without falling into either polytheism or the denial of Christ's deity. Although Sabellianism successfully emphasized the oneness of God, it was regarded as inadequate because it failed to explain the eternal interpersonal relationship among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit consistently presented throughout Scripture (Placher, 2006; Erickson, 2009).

The historical response of the Church demonstrates that Sabellianism was not accepted as orthodox teaching. Early theologians such as Tertullian and Hippolytus argued that Scripture consistently distinguished the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit while affirming their unity of essence. These theological discussions eventually contributed to the formulation of Trinitarian doctrine, later affirmed by the Councils of Nicaea (325 AD) and Constantinople (381 AD), which clarified that God exists eternally as one essence in three distinct Persons (Campenhausen, 1995; Tertullian, 1993).

Comparison Between Sabellianism and the Doctrine of the Trinity

The principal difference between Sabellianism and the doctrine of the Trinity lies in their understanding of the divine Persons. Sabellianism maintains that only one divine Person exists and that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are merely successive manifestations or functional roles assumed by God throughout salvation history. In contrast, the doctrine of the Trinity teaches that God is one in essence (*ousia*) while eternally existing as three distinct Persons (*hypostases*): the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These Persons are coequal, coeternal, and share the same divine nature without division or confusion (Bavinck, 2010; Warfield, 2012).

This distinction becomes evident through several biblical narratives. The baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:16–17) presents the Son being baptized, the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, and the Father's voice speaking from heaven simultaneously. Such an event cannot be adequately explained if the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are merely sequential manifestations of one Person. Likewise, the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) commands baptism in the singular "name" of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, expressing both unity of essence and distinction of Persons. Furthermore, John 1:1–3 affirms that the Word was both with God and was God, indicating an eternal relationship rather than a temporary manifestation (Augustine of Hippo, 2001; Erickson, 2009).

The comparison also highlights differences regarding divine relationships. Sabellianism denies any eternal interpersonal communion within God, whereas Trinitarian doctrine affirms that the Father eternally loves the Son and that the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds according to the biblical witness.

Consequently, the Trinitarian doctrine preserves both divine unity and relational distinction without compromising either theological principle (Geisler, 2013; Kelly, 2008).

Apologetic Evaluation of Sabellianism

From an apologetic perspective, the fundamental weakness of Sabellianism lies in its inability to account for the numerous biblical passages describing communication and fellowship between the Father and the Son. The Gospel of John records Jesus praying to the Father and referring to the glory shared before the creation of the world (John 17). Similarly, Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane demonstrates a genuine relationship between two distinct Persons rather than an internal dialogue of a single divine Person. Such passages consistently portray personal distinction while maintaining divine unity (Tertullian, 1993; Augustine of Hippo, 2001).

The early Church Fathers therefore rejected Sabellianism not because it emphasized monotheism, but because it oversimplified the biblical revelation of God's nature. Christian apologetics maintains that theological doctrines must be derived from the entirety of biblical revelation rather than from philosophical simplification. Accordingly, the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity represents a systematic synthesis of biblical teaching rather than a speculative philosophical invention. The Nicene and Constantinopolitan formulations sought to preserve the biblical testimony concerning both the unity of God and the eternal distinction of the divine Persons (Campenhausen, 1995; Gonzalez, 2004).

Moreover, the doctrine of the Trinity provides a coherent explanation of salvation history. The Father sends the Son, the Son accomplishes redemption through His incarnation, death, and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit applies the benefits of salvation to believers. This cooperative work among the three divine Persons cannot be adequately explained within the framework of Sabellianism because modalism reduces these relationships to temporary manifestations rather than eternal personal distinctions (Erickson, 2009; Warfield, 2012).

Contemporary Relevance of the Doctrine of the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity remains highly relevant for contemporary Christian theology and apologetics. A proper understanding of the Trinity provides the theological foundation for Christian worship, prayer, and salvation. Christians approach the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit, reflecting the distinct yet unified work of each divine Person within the economy of salvation. This doctrinal framework also serves as the basis for understanding God's eternal nature as revealed in Scripture (Bavinck, 2010; Geisler, 2013).

In the context of contemporary apologetics, the doctrine of the Trinity enables believers to respond to theological interpretations that either deny Christ's full divinity or reduce the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to symbolic or functional expressions. Historical theology demonstrates that the Church consistently preserved the balance between divine unity and personal distinction, avoiding both tritheism and modalism. Consequently, understanding the historical development and theological evaluation of Sabellianism contributes not only to historical scholarship but also to strengthening contemporary Christian faith and biblical interpretation (Gonzalez, 2004; Kelly, 2008; Tertullian, 1993).

CONCLUSION

Sabellianism emerged as an attempt to preserve the absolute unity of God by interpreting the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as different modes or manifestations of one divine Person. However, this interpretation does not fully correspond with the biblical testimony concerning the simultaneous presence, eternal relationship, and personal distinction of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The historical responses of the early Church also demonstrate that Sabellianism was rejected because it failed to maintain the balance between the unity of the divine essence and the distinction of the three divine Persons.

The doctrine of the Trinity provides a more consistent theological framework by affirming that God is one in essence and eternally exists as three distinct, equal, and inseparable Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This formulation preserves biblical monotheism while also explaining the interpersonal relationships revealed in the baptism of Jesus, the prayers of Christ, the Great Commission, and the work of salvation. Therefore, the doctrine of the Trinity should not be understood as a form of polytheism or philosophical speculation, but as a systematic expression of the biblical revelation of God.

From an apologetic perspective, understanding the distinction between Sabellianism and the doctrine of the Trinity is essential for explaining and defending the Christian faith accurately. The study also confirms that historical and biblical analysis can assist the Church in identifying theological interpretations that oversimplify the nature of God. Nevertheless, this study is limited to a library-based examination of selected historical, theological, and biblical sources. Further research may expand the discussion by examining contemporary forms of modalistic thought, their influence on modern Christian communities, and their implications for theological education and apologetic ministry.

REFERENCES

- Augustine of Hippo. (2001). *Tentang Tritunggal* (Y. M. Rantetampang, Trans.). Jakarta, Indonesia: Yayasan Komunikasi Bina Kasih.
- Ayres, L. (2004). *Nicaea and its legacy: An approach to fourth-century Trinitarian theology*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Bavinck, H. (2010). *Teologi doktrin dasar* (A. Yewangoe, Trans.). Surabaya, Indonesia: Momentum.
- Campanhausen, H. von. (1995). *Para bapa gereja masa awal* (A. Soedjarwo, Trans.). Jakarta, Indonesia: BPK Gunung Mulia.
- Erickson, M. J. (2009). *Teologi Kristen* (Vol. 1; Tim Lembaga Literatur Baptis, Trans.). Jakarta, Indonesia: Lembaga Literatur Baptis.
- Geisler, N. L. (2013). *Sistem teologi* (D. Santoso, Trans.). Surabaya, Indonesia: Momentum.
- Gonzalez, J. L. (2004). *Sejarah pemikiran Kristen* (Vol. 1; Tim BPK Gunung Mulia, Trans.). Jakarta, Indonesia: BPK Gunung Mulia.
- Holmes, S. R. (2012). *The quest for the Trinity: The doctrine of God in Scripture, history and modernity*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- Kelly, J. N. D. (2008). *Awal-awal ajaran Kristen* (A. Hadiyanto, Trans.). Surabaya, Indonesia: Momentum.
- Letham, R. (2019). *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, history, theology, and worship* (Rev. and expanded ed.). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.
- McGrath, A. E. (2013). *Historical theology: An introduction to the history of Christian thought* (2nd ed.). Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Olson, R. E. (1999). *The story of Christian theology: Twenty centuries of tradition and reform*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Placher, W. C. (2006). *Sejarah teologi Barat* (Vol. 1; Y. Kristianto, Trans.). Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Kanisius.
- Tertullian. (1993). Against Praxeas. In A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Vol. 3, pp. 597–627). Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark.
- Warfield, B. B. (2012). *Ajaran tentang Allah dan Tritunggal* (Tim Lembaga Literatur Baptis, Trans.). Jakarta, Indonesia: Lembaga Literatur Baptis.