

Early Church Heresies

Adoptionism - Also called *dynamic monarchianism*. From Theodotus of Byzantium and Paul of Samosata (2nd-3rd c.). Taught that Jesus was merely a virtuous man adopted by God, either at his birth or (more commonly) at his baptism or resurrection. Some versions have the man Jesus being possessed by a heavenly Christ. Condemned at the Synods of Antioch (264-269).

Apollinarianism - From Apollinaris of Laodicea (d. 390). The “God-in-a-bod” heresy. Taught that Jesus was a divine mind in a human body, thus denying the full humanity of Christ. Condemned at the First Council of Constantinople (381). A revised version of this is taught by modern Christian apologist William Lane Craig.

Arianism - From Arius (250-336), an elder in Alexandria, Egypt. Denied the deity of Christ and his consubstantiality (Greek *homoousios*) with the Father, teaching instead that Jesus was created in time by God the Father. Condemned at the Council of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381). Taught by modern-day Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Docetism - Denied the goodness of the physical world, teaching that Jesus only “seemed” (Greek *dokeo*) to have a physical body or to have died on a cross. Taught by various groups, including Gnostics and Marcionites. It was rejected in the Apostles’ Creed and ecumenical councils.

Ebionism - Means “poor ones” in Hebrew. A group of Jewish Christians who strictly observed OT laws and held various views on Jesus. Sometimes they considered him a pre-existent angel, sometimes a non-divine messiah, and sometimes a man possessed by a heavenly spirit. Modern critical scholars like Bart Ehrman often claim that Ebionites (and/or Adoptionists) represent the earliest Christology of the church.

Gnosticism - A family of related dualistic heresies that combined Greek philosophy/mythology with Christianity. Affirms a (good) spiritual reality consisting of a series of emanations/aeons from the divine Monad (“the One”), while the (evil) material reality is the creation of a lesser aeon called the Demiurge. Human souls are imprisoned in physical bodies, but capable of attaining salvation through secret “knowledge” (Greek *gnosis*).

Marcionism - Named after Marcion of Sinope (c. 85-160), who taught (somewhat similarly to Gnosticism) that the god of the Old Testament was a Demiurge, characterized by strict retributive justice and responsible for the creation of the material world. This god is contrasted with the loving and compassionate God of the New Testament. Marcion’s canon of Scripture excluded all Old Testament books, and included only highly edited (“de-Judaized”) versions of Paul’s letters and Luke’s gospel.

Modalism - From Noetus and Sabellius (and thus sometimes called *Sabellianism*), who taught that God is not three persons, but rather one person who acts in three “modes” (much like the same man can be a husband, a father, and employee). Sometimes pejoratively (and inaccurately) labeled *Patripassianism*, meaning that “the Father suffered” on the cross.

Monarchianism - A Greek term meaning “one-ruler-ism,” applied to various 2nd-century heresies that teach unitarian views of God. The two main forms were *modalistic monarchianism* (see Modalism) and *dynamic monarchianism* (see Adoptionism). These heresies were refuted by the various Logos theologians (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, etc.).

Monophysitism - Also called *Eutychianism*, after its chief proponent Eutyches, a 5th-century presbyter in Constantinople. The “hybrid Jesus” theory, which teaches that the divine nature of Christ completely absorbed his human nature, thereby resulting in a *tertium quid* (“third something”) neither truly human nor truly divine. Condemned as heresy at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451.

Montanism - Named after Montanus of Hierapolis (2nd c.). Also called the “New Prophecy.” A belief in continuing prophecy that supersedes previous revelation to the Apostles. Denied the possibility of repentance for believers who fell from grace. A more moderate version of Montanism was eventually adopted by the church father Tertullian.

Nestorianism - Named after Nestorius (386-450), Patriarch of Constantinople. The “tandem Jesus” heresy, which holds that the divine Logos/Son of God is united to the man Jesus, such that Christ is two persons in one body, rather than the orthodox view that he is one person two two natures (i.e. *hypostatic union*). Condemned as heresy at the Council of Ephesus (431) and Council of Chalcedon (451).

Pelagianism - From the British monk Pelagius (360-418), who denied original sin and humanity’s need for divine grace to do good works. Condemned in the writings of Augustine and at the Council of Ephesus (431).

Subordinationism - the belief that Christ is subordinate in nature to the Father. The church fathers of the 2nd-3rd centuries (Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, etc.), in their attempts to refute heresies on several fronts, were generally unable to escape some form of subordinationist Christology (often describing the Son’s relationship to the Father as like the rays of the sun, for example). Fully orthodox Trinitarianism did not emerge until Athanasius in the early 4th century.

- Today there are debates within the evangelical world over the question of the *eternal functional subordination of the Son* (EFS or ESS), which holds that Christ, while equal in nature and glory to the Father, plays a subordinate role/function to the Father within the eternal Triune godhead. This position is taught by Wayne Grudem, Bruce Ware, and others, but is rejected by most classical Reformed theologians as contrary to the doctrine of *divine simplicity*.