

On Naming the Trinity

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), at its recent national meeting in Birmingham, Alabama, received and commended to its congregations for study and for use in worship a paper on renaming the Trinity in ways intended to be more expressive of God's overflowing love. Some of the more striking suggestions are "Rainbow, Ark, and Dove," "Overflowing Font, Living Water, Flowing River," "Compassionate Mother, Beloved Child, and Life-giving Womb," "Sun, Light, and Burning Ray," and "Fire that Consumes, Sword that Divides, and Storm that Melts Mountains."

Such efforts are not new. For some years now, the Trinitarian personal language of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" has, on occasion, been replaced by threefold functional language such as "Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer." Interestingly, the current paper avoids this particular formulation, though it does use the closely related "Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier." And the paper is sophisticated enough at least to attempt to avoid the inherent reductionism involved in such an incomplete list of things God does.

However, what most if not all of the proposals share is the abhorrence of all things male and the determination never to allow a single male noun or pronoun to cross one's lips. This creates a problem for the Christian faith. Few if any people dispute that Jesus Christ was male. Few if any dispute that Jesus referred to God as "Father." The Bible and all the historic creeds understand Jesus as the Son of God. To avoid such realities runs the risks of separating the faith from its historical roots and of rejecting both the content and the authority of scripture.

Jesus frequently addressed God as "Father" (Matthew 11:25, Mark 14:36, Luke 10:21, John 17:1-26). He instructed his disciples to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). The presumption to know better than Jesus how to address God and how to name God reveals a dangerous arrogance.

This biblical witness shows that the "Father" language of the Trinity is grounded entirely in Jesus' own usage. This means that the Trinitarian doctrine of God is grounded wholly and exclusively in the actual facts of God's having become incarnate with us and for us in Jesus of Nazareth. To move the doctrine of God

away from his own language and instruction would be to move the whole basis and foundation of Christian faith onto grounds other than the incarnation, which would be a disastrously subjective and massively unfaithful enterprise!

Moreover, it has long been a part of the understanding of the Christian faith that the distinctions of the persons of the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not merely the way that God presents himself to us but actually the way that God is, in God's inner being. That is to say, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" are not merely replaceable images of God but are names of God. We are not at liberty to change those or to depart from them.

The paper received by the Presbyterian Church is careful to promote its alternative formulations for naming the Trinity as supplemental language and not as replacement language. The danger is, of course, that even with its supplemental use, certain distinctives of the Christian faith will be lost. For instance, the already commonplace expression, "Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer," may seem more benign than other suggestions but for that very reason may be more insidious. People of various theistic faiths might be able to refer to God as "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer," but only Christians believe that God the Father is eternally the Father of the Son and that God the Son is eternally the Son of the Father. This is distinctive Christian language, and as such it is necessary and irreplaceable Christian language.

Faithful, historic, and traditional Christian worship will continue to address God as "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." If, by way of contrast, you were to enter a gathering of people addressing songs and prayers to "Rainbow, Ark, and Dove," "Font, Water, River," "Mother, Child, and Womb," "Sun, Light, and Ray," and "Fire, Sword, and Storm," would you recognize that as worship of the God and Father of Jesus Christ or merely as a celebration of the vitalities of nature?

Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, VA 23220
www.grace-covenant.org