

# On the Trinity

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Over the last 10 years, we have seen an increasing incidence of candidates for the ministry and ministers transferring from one presbytery to another using functional language such as "Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer" to refer to the Trinity. This avoids using the personal language of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

Such language involves itself in several levels of problems. The first is that it represents a departure from the biblical witness. Jesus taught his disciples to address God as "Our Father" (Matthew 6:9). He instructed them 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 reveals a dangerous arrogance in and of itself.

At a second level, language such as "Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer," used in an attempt to refer to the Trinity, represents a significant departure from the confessional heritage of the church. All the documents in the *Book of Confessions* use language such as "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" to refer to the Trinity. None of them use "Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer." But the problem runs deeper than non-traditional language.

There is a theological concern. The substituting of "Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer" for "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" does more than avoid male references. It substitutes an incomplete list of God's functions for the naming of the persons and relations of the Trinity. This moves inexorably to modalism, a form of thought about the Trinity which was rejected as heretical about 1,500 years ago.

Some forms of modalism teach that God has existed in three different modes, one at a time. God was first Creator, then Redeemer and now Sustainer. This was rejected on the basis that God is all three of these all the time. Another form of modalism is monarchianism, which teaches that God the Father is the real God, and that the Son and the Spirit are projections of the Father. Again, this was rejected on the basis that the distinctions of the persons of the Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit are understood to be not merely the way that God presents himself to us but actually the way that God is, in God's inner being.

Against modalism, the church affirmed the reality of the three persons as distinct but inseparable, so that while it is appropriate to associate some of the works of God more closely with one person than another (for example, redemption with the Son), nevertheless we understand all three persons of the Trinity to be present and active in all the works of God.

This means that it is not only inadequate and inappropriate, but heretical, to refer to the Trinity simply as "Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer." There is little about this in the *Book of Confessions*, because this was settled doctrine a thousand years before the Reformation! The Reformers criticized medieval Roman Catholic views of grace and of the sacraments, but they accepted the classical teachings on the Trinity. The Second Helvetic Confession condemns the heresy of Sabellius, a modalist monarchian (5.015-.019).

Cynthia M. Campbell, president of McCormick Seminary, has written about this as follows:

Among feminist theologians, both within and outside the Reformed tradition, considerable discussion has been given to the status of the triune formula. Many argue that naming the triune God "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (and using masculine pronouns for all three) reinforces the incorrect notion that God is male and that only masculine language is strictly appropriate when speaking about God. Various proposals for alternative formulae have been made, the most common being the identification of the Persons by their function: for example, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer; or Creator, Christ and Spirit.

While having the advantage of removing exclusively masculine terms, these alternatives raise another difficulty. Early church theologians argued that the persons should not be distinguished by specific acts or functions, because this leads inevitably to a modalism (the threefold nature of God is found in the roles God plays toward us). In fact, they argued, the act of one is the act of all. Thus the Creed says that God the Father is "Maker of heaven and earth," God the Son is the One "by whom all things were made," and God the Spirit is "the Lord and Giver of Life" ("Trinity" in *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, WJKP, 1992).

These theological concerns lead to a third level of problems, a group of practical concerns. If candidates for the ministry or for transfer of ministerial membership are unwilling to use the word "Father," how are they going to lead congregations in the Lord's Prayer? How are they going to perform baptisms? How are they going to lead the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed? If people are unwilling to use this language, we need to know that before approving them to serve congregations. More to the point, we need to be willing not to approve them. We need to look to the ordination vows. The first calls for affirmation of belief in "one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit." The third asks, "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?"

If and when a person being considered for ordination declines and refuses to use the language of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" to refer to the Trinity, that person is clearly failing to be instructed, led and guided by the confessions of the church. All of the confessions use this language. None of them use "Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer" as a substitute for it. In fact, such modalism is rejected as heretical. So, the best face which could be put on a refusal to use the personal language for the Trinity would be ignorance of the confessions, which itself would disqualify a person from ordination. The worst face which could be put on such a refusal would be outright rejection of the guidance of the confessions, a willful disobedience which would also disqualify a person from ordination. Moreover, an affirmative answer to the third and fourth ordination questions would then be a lie.

From here, the problems worsen. Consider the elders and ministers who make up committees on ministry and presbyteries. Would it not be the case that each individual voting to approve for ordination those persons refusing to be guided by the confessions to use personal language for the Trinity would also be running the risk of violating his or her own ordination vows? Would

not an official act by a committee on ministry or a presbytery to approve such a person for ordination or for transfer into a presbytery run the risk of causing the body to become, by that very act, non-confessional, unbiblical and even un-Christian?

The use of "Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer" in the place of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" is not a matter of alternative but acceptable language. Instead, this is a matter of ancient heresies finding their way back into the life and faith of the church, with our full and knowing approval. Of all the things we are free to do, we are not free to abandon the normative language of the church. We cannot allow this to continue.