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God Talk is Not a Game

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Back in June, I commented on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s vote to "receive" a report advocating the use of alternative language for the Trinity. The proposed "triads" include "Rainbow, Ark and Dove," "Speaker, Word and Breath," "Overflowing Font, Living Water and Flowing River," "Compassionate Mother, Beloved Child and Life-Giving Womb," "Sun, Light and Burning Ray," "Giver, Gift and Giving," "Lover, Beloved and Love," "Rock, Cornerstone and Temple," "Fire that Consumes, Sword that Divides and Storm that Melts Mountains," and "The One Who Was, The One Who Is and The One Who Is to Come."

You get the point. In [my commentary](#) I argued that we have no right to rename God, in particular no right to rename the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A few days later, I posted a shorter [blog article](#) with further thoughts and documentation.

Now, the editors of *The Christian Century* are out with their own editorial. The editors tweak me for sounding "more like a Muslim describing the revelation to Muhammad in the Qur'an than a Christian describing a doctrine that the church took several centuries to hammer out." [See the editorial, "[What's in a Name?](#)," here.]

It did take the church a span of centuries to reach the developed doctrine of the Trinity. That's undoubtedly true. But it did not take the church long to learn to worship the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit — and to use these revealed names. Indeed, the New Testament itself demonstrates this clearly.

The editors then confuse the issue:

In fact, while the patristic theologians who formulated the doctrine of the Trinity were sure that "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" was the most biblically sound way to refer to the Triune mystery, they were well aware that these terms had their own problems. They could be interpreted to suggest that the Father precedes the Son in time, generates him sexually, and takes up different physical space from the Son, on the pattern of human fathers and sons. And while the words father and son relate to one another nicely, neither word assumes the presence of the Holy Spirit—which is perhaps the reason for the church's lingering forgetfulness of the Spirit.

Then:

The contemporary era presents a new set of challenges in naming God. Who can deny that many people inside and outside the churches think, when they hear Father-Son language, that God is being designated as male? God talk is in constant need of reappraisal in light of the biblical witness and the pastoral needs of God's people (this is true of the suggested revisions too, of course).

Missing here is a recognition of the obvious — that the names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are *revealed* names. "God talk" is not a game. The Trinity is indeed a mystery, but the *names* are plainly revealed in Scripture.

The editors do not help their argument by quoting Duke theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson to the effect that the traditional Trinitarian language of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as "persons" makes the Trinity sound like "two boys and a bird."

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