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## The God Who Names Himself

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**Wednesday, June 21, 2006**

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Now, along comes the Presbyterian Church (USA) and its controversial policy paper on gender-inclusive language for the Trinity. The more liberal denominations have been debating contentious issues such as sexuality for years. Yet, even as the PCUSA is embroiled in its own controversies over homosexuality, the denomination has decided that a bit of controversy over the Trinity is also in order.

On June 19, the 217th General Assembly of the church voted to “receive” and commend to the church for study the paper entitled “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing.” The recommendation before the General Assembly was modified so that the report was “received” rather than “approved,” but the result is practically the same. The paper is now a part of the official proceedings of the General Assembly and it is now forwarded to local congregations for study and application.

In its most controversial sections, the report suggests new triads of language that can be used in place of the biblical language for the Trinity—namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The new triads, suggested for employment in worship, 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.”

The report was also amended to assert that the biblical language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit remain standard for use during baptisms, supposedly because the language Jesus used in the Great Commission is more specific than in other biblical texts. This is itself an odd assertion, since the other references to God’s names throughout the Bible are equally specific and precise.

The controversial report was written by a team of theologians and church leaders. At the onset, the report claims to be responding to an inadequate appreciation for the Trinity in local congregations. “Despite the remarkable renewal of

Trinitarian theology in recent decades, this doctrine is widely neglected or poorly understood in many of our congregations,” the theologians noted.

In its opening sections, the report appears to be deeply rooted in Christian orthodoxy. “The doctrine of the Trinity is a summary of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It cannot be properly understood apart from this gospel, and the gospel cannot be fully understood apart from the doctrine of the Trinity,” the report states. Further: “The trinitarian understanding of God has been at the heart of the church’s message and prayer since its beginnings. Far from an ivory tower doctrine, it is a doctrine concerned with the truth of God and the reality of our salvation. Only God can save us and sanctify us. When we speak of the three distinct but inseparable persons of the Trinity, they are not to be understood, as modalism teaches, as mere masks or temporary roles that hide God’s deepest reality. Nor are Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit secondary deities or mere creatures of a supposedly solitary supreme God, as subordinationism teaches. The trinitarian faith of the church rejects both these views because they deny that God is truly present as our savior in Jesus Christ and truly present among and in us as the life-giving Spirit. Against the views of modalism and subordinationism the church declares in its doctrine of the Trinity that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are, together with God the Father, fully and eternally God.”

Shortly after that eloquent statement, however, the report jumps the tracks. Having established the link between the Gospel and the Trinity, the theologians then propose that the church is “liberated to interpret, amplify, and expand upon the ways of naming the triune God familiar to most church members. We are freed to speak faithfully and amply of the mystery of the Trinity. We may cultivate a responsible trinitarian imagination and vocabulary that bears witness in different ways to the one triune God known to us from scripture and creed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Faithfulness to the gospel frees us to honor and continue to use traditional ways of speaking the triune God even as it frees us to adopt new images and names.”

In one sense, the dangerous theological proposals found in this report all grow out of that amazing paragraph. There is absolutely no scriptural warrant for the church to “interpret, amplify, and expand upon the ways of naming the triune God.”

The real agenda behind the report quickly becomes evident. After establishing that all language related to God employs analogy, the report then relativizes these analogies in support of an agenda to liberate women from trinitarian language that “has been used to support the idea that God is male and that men are superior to women.” As the report rightly states, “God is not male.” On the other hand, God has named Himself as Father, and the linguistic framework God has revealed about Himself, including His names, is grounded in masculine, and not feminine, language or images.

Amazingly, the report goes so far as to assert that the church “should not insist on the exclusive use of the traditional trinitarian names, lest we quench the Spirit and even foster idolatry. Such a view would insufficiently acknowledge the divine mystery, would neglect the freedom of God’s children to glorify God imaginatively with all our hearts and minds, and would diminish the joy of knowing God ever more fully.”

That statement is truly stunning—especially when seen against the backdrop of the biblical text. In the Old Testament, God is particularly concerned to name Himself over against the idols that were so pervasive among the Canaanites and other peoples. The claim that “exclusive use of the traditional trinitarian names” would potentially “foster idolatry” is nothing less than amazing. Furthermore, there is absolutely no biblical mandate to “glorify God imaginatively” by changing the names by which He has named Himself.

Beyond this, some of the triads proposed in the report fall far short of theological orthodoxy. Others appear weirdly eccentric. The proposed triad of “The One Who Was, The One Who Is and The One Who Is to Come” implies a distinction of temporality between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. At the very least, this confuses the fact that the three divine persons of the Trinity are coeternal and coexistent.

Who would ever naturally assume that “Rainbow, Ark and Dove” or “Rock, Cornerstone and Temple” refer to the three persons of the Trinity? In what sense does the triad “Fire that Consumes, Sword that Divides and Storm that Melts Mountains” clarify the identity and glory of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?

The feminist agenda behind the proposals is most clear in their proposed triad, “Compassionate Mother, Beloved Child and Life-Giving Womb.” As one commissioner who opposed the report stated: “Words matter. If we use them loosely, unthinkingly, others might use them. Good people are led astray. Our Triune God is not a compassionate mother, a womb or a rainbow or other metaphors that have been lumped together.”

The essential question was posed by Reverend Jonathan Lovelady, who argued: “The question that cries to be answered is, ‘What does God want to be called?’”

That question is answered decisively in Scripture, where God *does* name Himself. The Christian faith is based exclusively in the understanding that God alone has the right to name Himself. Furthermore, Christianity is based in God’s revelation of Himself. Without God’s gracious self-revelation, we would know nothing about Him at all. The doctrine of the Trinity is itself a truth revealed by God about Himself as an act of His own self-giving grace and mercy to His human creatures. He does not invite His creatures to experiment in worship by naming Him according to their own desires.

The late Elizabeth Achtemeier once observed that “No aspect of the feminist movement has affected the church’s life more basically than has that movement’s attempts to change the language used in speaking to or about God.” As she explained, “The feminist claim is that all language about God is analogical and metaphorical, and that therefore it can be changed at will to overcome the church’s patriarchalism and foster women’s liberation. Principally, therefore, the feminists seek to eliminate all masculine terminology used of God, either by supplementing it with feminine terminology or by using neuter or female images for the deity exclusively.”

Indeed, leading feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether once remarked, “Feminist theology cannot be done from the existing base of the Christian Bible.” Therefore, a new “textual base” must be established in order to liberate women from the supposedly oppressive language by which God has named Himself in Scripture.

Once again, Professor Achtemeier set the issue clearly: “It is not that the prophets were slaves to their patriarchal culture, as some feminists hold. And it is not that the prophets *could not* imagine God as female: they were surrounded by people who so imagined their deities. It is rather that the prophets . . . *would not* use such language, because they knew and had ample evidence from the religions surrounding them that female language for the deity results in a basic distortion of the nature of God and of his relation to his creation.”

Indeed, against the backdrop of God's self-revelation in Scripture is the fact that the various paganisms common to Canaan and the ancient Near East involved the worship of female idols that inevitably devolved into gynecological theology—with the world pictured as having been birthed out of a divine womb.

As Roland M. Frye, a leading scholar of literature, once observed, "According to biblical religion, on the other hand, only God can name God. Distinctive Christian experiences and beliefs are expressed through distinctive language about God, and the changes in that language proposed by feminist theologians do not merely add a few unfamiliar words for God, as some would like to think, but in fact introduce beliefs about God that differ radically from those inherent in Christian faith, understanding, and Scripture."

In other words, the rejection of biblical language by which God has named Himself in favor of imaginative new language that fits the church's current tastes and imaginings is not merely a shift in language—it is a reformulation of the faith itself. Beyond this, it inevitably runs the risk of turning into a new form of paganism—a new linguistic form of idolatry.

Language matters. It always has, and it always will. This explains why God is so clear in naming Himself in Scripture. As Basil the Great bore witness in the early church, "We are bound to be baptized in the terms we have received and to profess belief in the terms in which we are baptized, and as we have professed belief in, so to give glory to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

Basil got it just right, and his warning resounds across the centuries. We have no right to tamper with the names by which God has named Himself. "It is enough for us to confess those names which we have received from Holy Scripture," explained Basil, "and to shun all innovations about them." The line here is not merely between traditional and imaginative language—it is the line between the worship of the one true and living God and the worship of idols.

