Leadership University *Reprint*

Reprinted from First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life • December 1991• Number 18

The Grammar of Baptism

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Feminism has become a truly significant force within American culture. Its presence and power is felt in all areas of our common life, and perhaps nowhere more keenly than in our use of language. We have all become sensitized to the need to be "inclusive" in our speech. Certain usages, conventionally accepted for generations, are alleged to express and undergird a patriarchal politico–economic system and thus to serve the exclusion of women from public life. This demand for linguistic inclusivity has now penetrated into the heart of American Christianity. It goes far beyond the language with which we speak of ourselves; for now the traditional language in which Christians speak of the deity–and specifically the triune name, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit–is claimed to be inherently oppressive of women. Our language for God, we are told, must be made inclusive.

In only ten to fifteen years, a revolution has occurred in churchly discourse. The inherited naming of divinity, previously understood to be sanctioned by Scripture and tradition, is now widely questioned and criticized. Throughout the mainline Protestant churches the triune name is subtly suppressed, while baptisms are administered in the names of various politically correct substitutes. Liturgies are composed that expunge all masculine imagery for the deity and omit references to God as Father or Jesus as the Son. Prayer directly addressed to God as Mother and other feminine titles is increasingly common. These changes are supported and advanced by both seminary theologians and denominational bureaucracies. While it is probably true that the new language has yet to penetrate deeply into the speech and piety of the laity, we may expect it soon to take hold as Sunday School and catechetical programs inculcate the proper habits.

Feminist theologians generally understand these changes as part and parcel of a radical reconstruction of our understanding of deity; clergy and bureaucrats, however, usually explain them along the more modest line of linguistic reform: what is being accomplished is the removal of offensive androcentric features of church language in order to proclaim the gospel more effectively in a society now sensitized to sexism. As Prayer Book Studies 30 of the Episcopal Church puts it, "We are challenged with being faithful to the credal tradition of the church, while, at the same time, naming the God who is 'One in Three and Three in One' in non–gender–specific terms." Thus it is claimed that the ecumenical trinitarian faith will continue to be preached and believed within the framework of the new language.

The claim that linguistic innovation will not affect belief is one that must be vigorously challenged. The triune name is essential to belief in God the Holy Trinity. It forms the identity of the Christian church and structures the grammar of catholic belief and practice. Christians cannot be *Christian* if they refrain from speaking the trinitarian language. By our baptism we are charged and authorized to name God by his revealed name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I

L*ex orandi, lex credendi*: the law of prayer, the law of belief. From the early church to today, Christian theologians have argued endlessly about the relationship between the worship and doctrine of the church. Which has priority? How do we specify and regulate the traffic between them? In the fourth century, Basil the Great added a twist of his own that is of particular relevance to the contemporary debate on God–language. He enunciated the following grammatical rule for Christian faith and worship:

For 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's assertion is that the *lex orandi, lex credendi* must be governed by our common baptism into the name of the Holy Trinity. Baptism is the ground of creed and liturgy; it structures both our profession of faith and offering of praise. The God to whom we pray is to be the same God confessed in the creeds of the church; the God in whom we declare our communal belief is to be the same God into whom we are baptized.

Holy baptism thus functions to shape the language of faith, and it does so with divine authority: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations," our Lord enjoins his followers, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). The baptismal mandate, mediated to us by the canonical Scriptures, is explicitly indited as a command of the risen Lord. In that it is presented in that layer of tradition that is both primitive and canonical–there is no other, more authoritative tradition over against which to appeal–it exercises a normative authority, an authority dominical and apostolic. By the decree of Christ, the church is sent into the world and instructed to initiate believers into the triune name of God. We either obey this command or we simply cease to be the church. The baptismal institution, therefore, is properly construed as foundational and constitutive of ecclesial life. From baptism flows our discourse and prayer, formed by that verbally identified reality into which we are sacramentally incorporated.

Theological reflection on the question of how to name God must begin with the public reality of our baptism. Each Christian has been bathed in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we share this one baptism with millions of believers both around the world and down the centuries. Throughout the history of the church, the triune name of God has been dogmatically required in the celebration of holy baptism, whether by declarative formula or confession of faith. If St. Basil is correct in his interpretation of the dogma, a specific use of language is thereby prescribed by the canonical institution: God is to be named Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The baptismal mandate, in other words, may be compared to a rule of grammar. Grammatical rules inform us how we may speak a given language in meaningful fashion. They tell us how a language works; they describe its structure and internal logic. In English, for example, subjects precede verbs, pronouns agree with their antecedents in number and case, transitive verbs must be completed by a direct object. When we violate these rules, we create confusion and nonsense; the language is abased. If we would communicate effectively, we must conform ourselves to the syntax and semantical patterns of the language. We must speak grammatically. The grammar of our native tongue is learned and assimilated long before we can explicitly state its rules. The rules come later as we reflect on our language's inherent constitution and attempt to communicate more clearly, more cogently, more gracefully.

Contemporary theologians such as Paul Holmer and George Lindbeck have asserted that Christianity is appropriately understood as a language–a communal way of life and discourse comprehending a distinctive vocabulary and interior logic. Its ritual, rhetoric, and theology are ruled by its constitutive structure; it possesses its own linguistic and grammatical integrity. Christianity is as different from the competing languages of secular culture, philosophy, ideology, or religion as English is from Spanish or Chinese. As Christians participate in the corporate life of the church, as we share in the ecclesial discourse and experience the sacraments, as we learn the doctrinal norms and become proficient in the Scriptures, liturgy, and ascetical disciplines, we appropriate to ourselves the apostolic idiom. We internalize its grammar. We become fluent in the language of faith. To be a mature Christian is to be a person who, with competence and facility, speaks and lives that gospel ruled by the grammar of Christ.

Baptism into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit presents us with the fundamental grammatical principle of Christian speech: to properly speak the Christian God is to speak to and of him by those terms into which we are baptized. Consequently, Basil is emphatic on the precise wording of the baptismal naming. "It is enough for us," he declares, "to confess those names which we have received from Holy Scripture, and to shun all innovations about them."

II

"The church," writes George Lindbeck, "is fundamentally identified and characterized by its story." Perhaps every community has a certain story it tells in order to be the community it is, but in any case certainly the Christian church has its own distinctive story. The church is that unique assembly which proclaims the narrative of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the redemption and eschatological consummation of the world. Christians speak not of deity–in–general but of the God who is self–revealed in the biblical drama: three actors–Father, Son, Spirit–who together, in essential unity, accomplish the salvation of mankind. By this story of the triune God, the baptized are indissolubly bound together; by this story we are constituted as Christian. Our preaching, therefore, has distinct trinitarian form as we expound to the world the God of the gospel.

Christians tell the story of the God of Israel, whom Jesus names Father. This God creates the universe by speaking it into existence *ex nihilo* and now rules it by his providential care. He is the God who calls Abraham to leave his home and travel into the far land of Canaan, promising to make him and his heirs into a great nation. He is the God who confronts Moses in the burning bush and commissions him to lead the chosen people out of slavery into the freedom of the promised land. It is this God who forms his people by Torah and sacrifice, who dwells with them in tabernacle and temple, who guides and admonishes them by prophet, priest, and king. And it is this God who pledges to send a savior, the Messiah, to deliver his people from oppression and establish his kingdom on earth.

Christians tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son and Messiah of this God. Born of the Virgin Mary, raised in Nazareth, this Jesus startles, delights, disappoints, and angers the people of Israel. To his followers, he speaks and acts with an authority that can only be called divine; to his enemies, he is heretic, blasphemer, charlatan, false prophet.

To sinners and outcasts, he is the gracious embodiment of the future kingdom; to the religious professionals, he is betrayer of the traditions of Moses. To the Roman occupiers, messianic pretender and revolutionary threat; to the Palestinian zealots, a wild–eyed religious fanatic who undermines political action. No wonder all seem to conspire to put him out of the picture. He is forsaken, tried, and convicted on trumped–up charges, crucified. But the Father vindicates his Son on Easter morning by raising him from the dead, exalting him as Lord and Savior. This Jesus will return in glory to judge both the quick and the dead.

Christians tell the story of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Father and the Son. The Spirit anoints the prophets to speak God's mighty Word. He fills Jesus with omnipotent power to heal the sick, exorcise evil, raise the dead. It is this same Spirit who on the day of Pentecost is poured out on the church in tongues of flame, filling the disciples with joy and praise. By the Spirit, the church is driven into the world to proclaim the gospel and bring sinners into the new creation of the kingdom. Into this Spirit each believer is baptized and reborn.

It is the evangelical story of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that identifies the church of Jesus Christ. By this narrative, Godhead is faithfully revealed and his loving intentions for the world made known. The narrative functions as the imaginative paradigm through which both deity and creation are interpreted. In it the community of faith discovers its purpose, its mission, its final hope and destiny. It is this narrative that is recapitulated in the triune name. The threefold appellation may thus be said to identify the church, for it encompasses that story which the church tells, and must tell, in order to be the church. When Christians are baptized into this name, we are baptized into a way of life, being, and speaking constituted by the biblical story of the trinitarian God. When baptized into this name, we are baptized into the *proper name* of our Lord and Savior. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit denominates the deity of the church's baptizing.

Proper names refer us to distinct objects rather than classes of objects. In common American parlance, *God* functions as a proper name, but not a very helpful one since it is usually divorced from concrete descriptions of the deity's historical activity; consequently, anyone can mean just about anything by the word *God*. The Gallup Poll tells us that the overwhelming majority of Americans believe in God, but the crucial question is, which one?

In the resurrection of Jesus, as Robert Jenson argues persuasively, God publishes his personal name of the new covenant: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This name accomplishes that which "God" cannot do on its own. It identifies the deity as being precisely the deity of the biblical narrative. Each term within the triune name binds us irrevocably to the story we proclaim as gospel; each term denotes the Lord of salvation history. By this name, the holy creator introduces himself to the world. The Gospel accounts of the baptism of Jesus succinctly articulate the content of the name and the mutual relationships of the terms. Who is the Father but the One who pours out his Spirit on the Nazarene. "You are my Son, whom I love," he tells Jesus; "with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). And who is the Son but the Galilean rabbi who obediently submits to the baptism of John that the righteousness of his Father might be fulfilled (Matt. 3:15). And who is the Spirit but the Spirit of the coming kingdom who is poured out on Jesus to empower him for his messianic ministry, the Spirit who is the love, life, futurity of the Father and the Son. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit–these names signify the three agents of salvation who are God the Holy Trinity; together they form one name proper and personal to the Christian God.

III

Recent scholars have emphasized that the experience of deity is defined by, and thus inseparable from, the language in which it is expressed. As Garrett Green observes, language is the mother of our experience. We do not first have a religious experience and then seek appropriate forms in which to symbolize it; rather, we receive the experience in the exercise of the language. By our immersion in a religious tradition and our appropriation of its speech and practical habits, we are enabled to experience the world–and deity–religiously. The alleged prelinguistic encounter with God, which founds the intellectual efforts of virtually all liberal–expressivist and feminist theologians, is chimerical. The deity is known within the context of the discourse and ritual of a living community. The communal language functions as the interpretive grid through which and by which the divine is apprehended. Green writes:

Religious language is . . . speech arising out of commitment to specific religious paradigms. People with different paradigmatic commitments characteristically have different experiences.

Through our participation in the imaginative and linguistic paradigm of a given tradition, our encounter with God is figured. To put it in scientific jargon, all sacred experience is "theory–laden." Christianity above all, which knows deity as word, as the Word, should understand the primacy of language in our experience of God.

By the revealed name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the church's experience of deity is linguistically defined. This name is sealed into the very being of ecclesial existence. Christians live within this name, by this name, from this name. When we gather as community, whether to celebrate Eucharist, ordain to office, anoint for healing, offer divine blessing, we invoke the proper name of our God. Christians are the people of the Trinity, fashioned, disciplined, molded by the divine appellation. The threefold name, therefore, structures each believer's experience of God. It functions as the linguistic paradigm through which the deity is known and apprehended.

The trinitarian experience of God occurs definitively and paradigmatically in the liturgy. Christians are commanded by the Lord Jesus Christ to address his Father as their Father. "Pray then like this," he instructs his disciples: "Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy Name" (Matt. 6:9). Contrary to feminist assertions, "Father" is not just one of the many optional metaphors by which Christians symbolize their religious experience. It is a naming and filial term of address *revealed* in the person of the eternal Son. Throughout the New Testament, Jesus is portrayed as invoking the holy God of Israel as his Father. By this naming, our Lord expresses the intimate inner communion between them, a consubstantial relationship of knowing and love constitutive of the Godhead. "No one knows the Son except the Father," Jesus says, "and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt. 11:27).

When Christians name God "Father," therefore, we are naming him in and through and by the divine Son. The filial invocation is both a privilege of adoption in Christ Jesus and a duty of discipleship. By baptism we are incorporated into the humanity of our Lord and his eternal relationship with the Father in the power of the Spirit. The Apostle Paul declares:

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15). But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father" (Gal. 4:4–6).

By the gift of the Spirit, Christians are given to share in the eternal sonship of the second person of the Trinity; we are drawn into his eternal conversation with his Father in the love who is Spirit. The prayer, praise, intercession, and filial address of the risen Christ are actualized and embodied in the lives of his adopted brothers and sisters. Thus we boldly call God, Father. The worship of the church must be interpreted, not as the work we do over against the deity, but as participation in the deity, as participation, by grace, in the triune society of the Godhead. Apart from the revealed name, Christianity necessarily collapses into some form of unitarian or pagan religion.

IV

The law of baptism is the law of belief and worship. The great Anglican divine Richard Hooker saw this quite clearly in the sixteenth century. In defending the Anglican form of the Gloria Patri against Puritan objections, he wrote:

Baptizing we use the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; confessing the Christian faith we declare our belief in the Father, and in the Son, and in the Holy Ghost; ascribing glory unto God we give it to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. It is . . . "the token of a true and sound understanding" for matter of doctrine about the Trinity, when in ministering baptism, and making confession, and giving glory, there is a conjunction of all three, and no one of the three severed from the other two.

Baptism, creed, liturgy–all three interweave to form a language of faith. To alter or replace the trinitarian formula is thus to attack the basic grammar of catholic belief and practice.

Let us examine three recently proposed linguistic substitutions. First, the increasingly popular "Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier." This formula does not and cannot function as a proper name, for it does not identify; it does not indicate directly to which deity it is referring. Presumably, creating, redeeming, sanctifying are activities in which most, if not all, ostensible deities engage. In traditional theology, the Christian God *becomes* creator, redeemer, sanctifier by his contingent decision to create, redeem, and sanctify; but he *is eternally* Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in his inner relational life.

Second, "God, eternal Word, Holy Spirit." This formula may be quickly dismissed because of its overt subordinationism. That is to say, its wording suggests that only the first person of the Trinity is truly God, and the Word and Spirit are less so. The word *God* is a problematic substitute for the vocative "Father." Each person of the Godhead, according to orthodox doctrine, is fully and completely divine; each is God. Within Christian discourse, therefore, *God* must be understood not as a proper name but as a predicate. The Father is God. Jesus is God. The Holy Spirit is God. "When I say God," St. Gregory of Nazianzus explained, "I mean Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

Of course, do we not often begin our prayers by saying "O God" or some such equivalent? Within the trinitarian grammar, this common practice is at least ambiguous. When we Christians name God "God," we are naming him by way of our creaturehood and acknowledging him as supreme being and creator. When we name God "Father," on the other hand, we are naming him from within the Godhead, naming him by that name which properly belongs to God as the Father of Jesus Christ.

Finally, "Mother, Lover, Friend." This truly feminist alternative sharply poses the issue before us. Whereas Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is manifestly grounded in the biblical narrative, explicitly identifying the three agents of salvation history, Mother, Lover, Friend has only a tenuous relationship (at best) to the same narrative. (In the Scriptures, for example, deity is occasionally *compared* to a mother but is never *named* Mother.) What story are we telling when we name divinity thus, and what are its warrants? And if by this naming we are telling a different story, are we not creating a new religion? Moreover, each of the terms of the formula appears to refer, not to the triad, but to divinity conceived as monad or unitarian being; each refers to the one deity's external relationship to her creation. In contrast, as noted above, the triune name refers us to the three persons of the Godhead in their inner relational life. The two formulas are not in any way commensurate.

V

The very logic of the triune appellation, then, impels Christians to speak and pray in trinitarian fashion. Our discourse is ruled by the grammar of the proper name of our God. This is why current feminist proposals to change, alter, or eliminate the triune name are of such serious theological import. These proposals represent nothing less than a fundamental, and in my opinion, heretical reconstruction of Christian belief. If American Christianity would be faithful to that catholic trinitarian faith articulated in the Nicene Creed, then it must clearly and decisively confess the true and proper name of its God–Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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