What's in a name? Generating new discussion of the triune God: Generating new discussion of the triune God

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The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) provided a pleasant respite from the normal summer news of denominational wrangling over homosexuality. The PCUSA General Assembly actually talked about God. Delegates last month voted to “receive” (rather than approve or send back to committee) a study document that encourages churches to explore various words and images for the Trinity.

The headlines were predictably sensationalistic. CNN announced, “Presbyterians stay with Trinity language,” as though the assembly had considered undoing its founding documents. The *Presbyterian Layman* screeched, “Trinity paper invites female view of Trinity,” ignoring entirely the document’s concern that “Father-Son” language invites a male view of the Trinity. Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, offered his opinion: “The Christian faith is based exclusively in the understanding that God alone has the right to name himself. . . . He does not invite his creatures to experiment in worship by naming him according to their own desires.” Mohler sounds 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.

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.

The description of the three as "persons" (*hypostaseis* in Greek, *personae* in Latin) has always been a problem. It sounds like three "people"—or, as Duke theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson says, as if the Trinity is "two boys and a bird." The Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed definitively states that the Son is *homoousion* or "one in being" with the Father, thereby making use of a word not found in the Bible. Early critics pointed out, and the orthodox had to agree, that the term can suggest that Father and Son share some kind of physical "stuff"—which of course cannot be the case for God. We might sum up the early church's debate by saying that "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" represents the least misleading way to refer to God.

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).

The PCUSA document insists that the language of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is "rooted in scripture and creed" and "remains an indispensable anchor for our efforts to speak faithfully of God." The document continues, "With this anchor in place, however, we are liberated to interpret, amplify, and expand upon the naming of the triune God familiar to most church members."

The list of the "plenitude of images" for the Trinity comes with accompanying scripture citations. "The One From Whom, Through Whom and in Whom we offer praise" may not roll off the tongue, but it comes from Paul (Rom. 11:36). St. Augustine's "Lover, Beloved, and the Love between them" is also noted, as is St. John Damascene's "Sun, Light and Ray." The language that has drawn the most critical fire, "Mother, Beloved Child, and Life-Giving Womb," has biblical verses to back it up—Isaiah 46:3 and 49:15 and Matthew 3:17. The study document makes plain what the fathers and mothers of the church also taught: none of these names entirely captures God, and all must be measured against the plumbline of the scriptural and creedal renderings of the economy of salvation best summarized by "Father, Son and Spirit."

The document does display a pronounced allergy to masculine language, even while affirming it. It avoids citing some of the church's most important rules for

understanding God—for example, that the Son is everything the Father and the Spirit are, except that he is not the Father or the Spirit (that is, each is not one-third of God, but each is “all” of God)—apparently because those rules involve using masculine language. One of the document’s favorite formulas, “God, Christ, Spirit,” carries the unfortunate connotation that Christ and the Spirit are less than God. Perhaps a better approach than shielding people from the male-heavy terminology of the early church would be to let that language be explored in its depth alongside the language of Julian of Norwich (who refers to all three persons in feminine terms) or that of modern feminists.

These are quibbles, however. The document is sound, and the committee that drafted it is to be commended—especially if it serves to generate new discussion and contemplation of the triune God of Christian confession.