



## **Inclusive Language and Speaking of God: It’s Not “Anything Goes”**

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How we address God and speak of God are crucial concerns. The way we handle these concerns discloses whether we are standing within the historic tradition of the church—the faith once delivered to the saints—or have embarked on a sidetrack of heresy.

The contemporary “God-language” debate is not a matter of theoretical curiosity but has far-reaching dimensions for the church in the 1990s.

- questions of orthodoxy and of deliberate or naive departure from the Christian tradition;
- issues of our biblical and confessional foundations;
- concerns about responsible and appropriate leadership in worship and pastoral care; and
- implications for further ecumenical developments.

Just as the Christ of the gospel embraces all who hear, repent, and believe, so we should carefully attend to the words we speak and write so as to reflect the gospel’s address to all people. But this challenge should elicit from us wisdom, not foolish smashing of biblical and historical doctrinal affirmations and liturgical forms. Indeed, so-called inclusive language, poorly practiced, can become exclusive and offensive—an amateur effort counterproductive to the overall purpose of sensitive and responsible communication.

### *1. Within the Trinitarian Tradition*

Most certainly, “anything goes” is not the church’s confessional stance. We must affirm the Trinitarian tradition, which confesses the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Otherwise, rather than being part of the church catholic, we will be subverted into some peculiar sect, drinking from the cesspools of Baal instead of worshiping the one true God.

Addressing this central issue, Gail Ramshaw observes,

The doctrine of the Trinity remains in the twentieth century a test of Christian orthodoxy. Thus it is both desirable and essential that liturgical worship acknowledge God with the biblical names Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Gail Ramshaw, *Worship: Searching for Language* (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1988) 174.

Unless we wish to abandon the essentials, we must reject proposals that would cast aside the traditional language regarding God’s self-revelation—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—for

which Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier are not direct synonyms. Substitution of “Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer” for the Trinitarian name of God may lead to modalism, the naive assigning of one function to each person of the Trinity deemed heretical by church tradition.

The Trinitarian name of God is embedded in Christian biblical and creedal foundations. Therefore, a confessional perspective teaches that valid Christian baptisms require use of the Trinitarian name—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in the sacramental event of water with the Word. If I learned that I had been baptized in the name of the “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,” I would *not* ask to be *re*-baptized. I would ask to be *baptized* “in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Donald G. Bloesch writes,

While the language of faith should be as inclusive as the gospel itself, problems arise when people motivated by ideological commitment seek to improve upon the language of revelation....What is at stake is not simply the doctrine of the Trinity but the integrity and identity of the church of Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

## 2. *An Emotionally Volatile Issue*

The debate on God-language rages hot and heavy not only because of theological issues. It is emotionally volatile because many people perceive some threat to two deeply-felt emotional and psychological aspects of their lives—their spirituality and their sexuality. This matter of how we address and speak about God, therefore, must be handled carefully for both doctrinal and personal reasons. To deal with it carelessly resembles the foolishness of waving a burning match in a room full of gasoline-soaked confetti.

Good pastoral common sense is needed. Demonstrating cuteness or cleverness in adjusting or altering biblical or liturgical language is not commendable, particularly in view of the turmoil experienced by many congregations as a result of such imprudence.

A key commitment—one that should be practiced throughout the church—would be the use of approved texts, such as ones prepared by the international ecumenical English Language Liturgical Consultation. This commitment to use agreed upon texts is particularly crucial in our ecumenical relationships. A bishop of another church spoke recently of a growing concern. He indicated that he did not know how much longer his church could continue to participate in joint prayer services with Lutherans because of the failure of some Lutheran presiders to follow the mutually developed service order. He asked, “Are Lutherans no longer willing to use the trinitarian name of God in worship?”

An astounding question? Yes. But his inquiry underscores how serious the issue has become in the area of ecumenical relationships.

“Watch your language,” your mother or father wisely may have said to you when you were a child. The same admonition needs to be heard now by all pastors and other leaders throughout the church.

<sup>2</sup>Donald G. Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity: The Debate over Inclusive God-Language* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1985) 50, 11-12.

## **Inclusive Language and Speaking of God: The Gospel at Stake**

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There is a controversy going on over so-called inclusive language in the life of the church today. It is impossible to evade it, given the fact that it poses a theological issue of the highest order. The controversy is about how we speak of God in our language of prayer and proclamation. The question of what language to use is inseparable from the question of the identity of the particular God of whom we speak. It is possible for us to use language so nondescript that it fails to identify which God among all possible deities we aim to address.

Lay people thought that clergy were clear about such things, that that's what they went to seminary to learn. But now the laity cannot be so sure. Clergy, many of them, are messing around with the people's liturgy. When laity go to church, they may discover their ministers having a hard time reading the Bible. Some ministers don't like some of the things or some of the words written by the biblical authors. When the Bible says "father," it should also say "mother"; when it says "son," it should better say "child"; when it says "Jews" it really means just plain "people," etc. They also hear pastors stuttering through the liturgy, trying to avoid all personal pronouns for God, or fumbling around for neutered substitutes for masculine images referring to God and Christ, or for terms such as "Lord," "King," "Master," "Son of Man," "Son of God," and the like. They observe the clergy, some of them, replacing the Holy Name of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with some other triadic formula that fails to specify God by name. The most common replacement is "Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier." One clever theologian has proposed "Mother, Lover, Friend." Invocations and benedictions have become a studied exercise in avoiding the trinitarian formula, as though it were a dirty word. Reports circulate, though I have no personal evidence of their truth, that some pastors are even baptizing infants without using the name of the Trinity.

### *1. Getting at the Real Issue*

The issue of inclusive language is easily confused with a collection of other items. We should try to specify what the controversy is not about. The controversy is not about change in the liturgy. The liturgy did not fall down from heaven. And though people will always resist change in the church, the church was made to

change: It lives in history. Christians are called to change: that's what conversion is all about. So our struggle is not about change *per se*. It's about what kind of change; it's about the criterion of change and by whose authority. Whose big hand is working behind the scenes manipulating the changes now going on in the name of inclusive language?

We need also to make clear that the controversy is not about using female imagery in depicting attitudes and activities of God. The controversy is not about the role of women in the church, or women's ordination to the pastoral office. Nor can there be any argument among Lutherans, as there is among Episcopalians, whether women can be bishops. That is already

decided. The controversy is not between those who are for or against women's rights, responsibilities, and privileges in church and society. Often those who advocate linguistic surgery on the Bible and on the church's trinitarian/christological language-tradition pretend to occupy the high moral ground as champions of equality and justice for women. Such an equation does not stem from moral prophecy, but from just bad theology. I would venture a guess that by far the majority of faithful women in the church do not want ministers to exchange the trinitarian language of faith for their legitimate social and cultural struggles for liberation in all dimensions of life.

The controversy boils down to this one theological point. The God of Jesus Christ appeared in history with a specific name. Christian faith is thenceforth bound up with Jesus and the One he called "heavenly Father." Jesus' heavenly Father is none other than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus called this God his "Abba" in the most intimate language possible. This God was not his mother. He knew who his mother was, and so do we. Jesus' Abba could love like a mother and care like a mother. The Bible and the Christian tradition have set ample precedents for using feminine analogies, similes, and metaphors in speaking about God. If that is what is meant by inclusive language, I am in favor of it.

## 2. *The Matter of the Name of God*

When it comes to the *name* of God, however, that is a qualitatively different matter. God has a name, a *nom propre*. On account of Jesus' particular relationship to God he is revealed as the Son of God the Father. On account of Jesus, too, we believe in the Holy Spirit whom he sent. No possible change in the relations between men and women, in the family structure, or in the social order could justify a revision of God's name, without altering the faith itself. Otherwise, we would simply have to accept Feuerbach's projection theory of religion. Any change in God's name points to a different religion. A different name means a different God and a different gospel. That's what the controversy is all about.

Let no one then be alarmed when the charge of heresy and apostasy is made in the church today. When it becomes bad taste to refer to Jesus as Lord and King, that is heresy. When Lutheranism joins the mainline Protestants who take offense at the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, One God who alone is to be worshipped and glorified, that is apostasy. When Professor Robert W. Jenson declared at the St. Olaf "Call to Faithfulness" Conference (June, 1990), "A church ashamed of her God's name is ashamed of her God," he received an electric ovation from the large crowd. That was a sign of health and hope in the church, after all. Not everyone is buying the surrender of God's name for the sake of inclusive language.