

Calling upon the Name of God: Father as Personal Name

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Current efforts to speak of God have gone beyond gender plurality (he/she/it) to gender negation of pronouns for God. This is salutary when one is dealing with the hidden God, since it follows the mystics' path from the cataphatic, "God is a mother hen," to the apophatic, "God is not a mother hen," in order to enter the cloud of unknowing. But the public preacher is responsible for the opposite movement, fleeing the cloud by naming God and giving God's word of promise as in baptism.

Calling upon the name of the Lord is more than thinking about God, since those who do it will be saved (Rom 10 and Joel 2). We can get a feel for the importance of this by the work of naming a baby. Parents know the name is going to be more than a mere description like "our second child" or "the one with a brown tuft of hair," and they avoid naming their child after good ideas like "nonviolence." They especially refuse to let the child name herself by her own experience. When they finally name her Sally they cause that name to refer definitively to this one person, and the name becomes useable. You can call her to account or praise her with the name.

Just so, the baptism of Sally is an actual dubbing, or bestowal, of the name that announces who she is to others and herself and makes her the person so named. From that time the name must be passed on to others so they know to whom they refer and identify the same person each time they use the name. Sally's name is applied or caused, and at the same time the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is actually bestowed to her through the preacher: "I baptize you, Sally, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." We are not left to cataphatic descriptions of God that get us into the ballpark of divinity like "Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier," or "the one who divided the waters of the Red Sea." Instead we are linked to the rigidly determined name of God as in a causal chain and in this way are given the name by which we are saved. That is why the name of God given in baptism is the same name applied at Jesus' baptism, "You are my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased."

The contrary notion that names are groupings of descriptions based on sense perceptions entered in order to deal with the problem of modern criticism in

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Calling upon the Name of God: Father as Metaphor

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Speech is not a neutral form of communication. We are all too aware of the problems that arise when our speech does not communicate what we intended or when our tone of voice imparts a meaning that gets misread by the listener. Language does not innocently reflect an objective reality existing behind the words.

The relativity of speech has been heightened in a multicultural and pluralistic context such as the one we inhabit in North America. And yet we continue to act and speak as if we were in a homogeneous context, using language that was forged in another political, economic, social context. Often, our speech attempts (albeit unconsciously) to re-create or even impose a certain homogeneity. I have witnessed parishes in which any pious expression that is not considered “normal” for that community was looked upon with either embarrassment or suspicion.

In North America today, as sensitivity continues to grow towards those who have been excluded, language needs to reflect this attentiveness and the priorities a faith community has set for itself. All of us need to be keenly aware of this power of language as practice—and its double-edged characteristic: it can be life-giving, community-forming practice or exclusionary practice. Gail Ramshaw, with great insight, notes this power of language as practice when she writes, “People’s participation in powerful speech was strong enough to alter their perception of the universe and perhaps the universe itself.”¹ Ramshaw suggests that powerful speech can not only alter our perception of reality but that our participation in speech actually creates a reality for us. The way we tell our stories not only alters our perception of the world but actually creates the world in which we live.

The way we practice language determines the community, the message, and even the God we are serving. Perhaps the most radical, most dangerous characteristic of language resides in its creative power. We are able to create our own god through the use of language. We can turn God into a god of judgment or a white male god or a black male god or a god of privilege, hierarchy, and power. Through our use of language, we create a god who looks very much the way we want god to be.

We can no longer ignore the power of language—the metaphors, the images, even the stories—we use in our most public space of theology, the liturgy. Person-

¹Gail Ramshaw, *Reviving Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language* (Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 2000) 2.

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which names do not necessarily refer to an existing person, such as Santa Claus. Behind this issue is the modern suspicion that God is a “name” that refers to someone who doesn’t exist. It is supposed that subjective experience is enough (and really all there is) to refer to God. Consequently, there is a preference for naming God by analogy according to one’s personal or group experience so that this hidden God I call out to is like me, indeed is a projection of me. Women use descriptive references like a mother hen which give them positive experiences of God rather than having some male’s experience imposed upon them. A theologian therefore multiplies analogies of God so as to suit as many subjective experiences as possible. But at the same time, one restricts one crucial area of reference to God by removing pronouns that refer to male/female/neuter precisely because they indicate when one is dealing with a real person.

This pronoun exercise is not at its core fighting for gender equality, but is the revolt of reason to being baptized in which God has a fixed, determined name that I use in my hour of trouble. Yet a true preacher is not persuasively describing God, but gives the name above all names. That means that Sally is being dubbed Sally in the baptism (this particular, fixed sinner), and at the same time she is given the name by which God is dubbed. God’s name is not simply a set of descriptions of God’s mighty acts or our sensations of God. It is the name applied to us that we can use successfully in referring to the original, fixed name as in a causal chain.

The fact that God’s name is already fixed by another time and place when it reaches us seems at first like an imposition, or that his name is an accident—until the name speaks, as persons do, and says “I forgive you.” Then we understand *a posteriori* why that name is given to us by Christ, whose Father now becomes ours (“Our Father, who art in heaven”), and whose Spirit is bestowed on us in baptism. Then and there our name is fixed to God’s definite name in a freedom far beyond noble, legal principles like equality of male and female. In his new kingdom the law finally comes to an end, and it was that law, after all, not Christ, which demanded such distinctions as Jew/Gentile, male/female. There is no other way to call upon the name of the Lord in the final day. Yet this gospel is truly fixed and certain for faith. Still I am the first to admit that reason will always be repulsed by the name because it is repulsed by him. ⊕

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ally, I am bewildered by the continued use of *only* the masculine for God despite the fact that so many women have expressed their sense of exclusion by that language. What are we attempting to preserve by maintaining this masculine imagery?

Any “language that excludes, trivializes, marginalizes, or renders some people invisible” is a form of oppression.² Language can be oppressive just as it can be inviting. I am not arguing for the abolishment of masculine language for God. We still need to be able to use the term “Father” as a valid metaphor for God but we also need to ask ourselves what happens to our communities when that is the only metaphor that we allow or sanction?

In her book *In Her Own Rite*, Marjorie Procter-Smith outlines several options for expanding our language.³ Perhaps, the one we know best is “inclusive language.” Ruth Duck makes another proposal suggesting the use of expansive language.⁴ In the perspective of expansive language, God comes to us in an overwhelming life-giving presence that words can never fully capture or express. God cannot be “said” in only one way, with one metaphor. Expansive language seeks to draw upon the full metaphoric range of scriptural language for God and for creation, moving beyond simply gendered descriptions of God. The psalms are perhaps our richest source of such language: God is light, rock, shield, fortress, etc. The risk of expansive language lies in moving beyond scriptural references.

The challenge posed by innovation (expansion) of liturgical language, in the way we address God in worship and prayer, relates directly to its rootedness in Scripture. This challenge is acutely felt when replacement formulae are proposed for the classic benediction and baptismal formula, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” The challenge consists in making that formula speak gospel today while remaining rooted in Scripture. One beautiful example of the final benediction comes from the Anglican Church of Australia: “Holy Eternal Majesty, Holy Incarnate Word, Holy Abiding Spirit, bless you...”⁵

The classic baptismal formula is of course ecumenically accepted. And when the faith community has been well grounded in the multiple and diverse manners that Scripture names God, we can faithfully and joyfully use the old formula that takes us beyond the walls of our local congregation into the mystery of communion that is the church. ☩

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²Delores Dufner, “With What Language Shall We Pray?” in *Worship* 80/2 (March 2006) 144. She is citing Kathleen Hughes.

³Marjorie Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* (Akron, OH: OSU Publications, 1990) 52ff.

⁴Ruth C. Duck, “Expansive Language in the Baptized Community,” in *Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology: A Reader*, ed. Dwight W. Vogel (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000) 286–294. As an example, see Ruth Duck’s hymn “Arise Your Light Has Come” (Evangelical Lutheran Worship #314).

⁵*A Prayer Book for Australia* (Alexandria: Broughton Books, 1995).