



Baptizing in the Name...

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There are two polestars which guide my journey toward faithful baptismal language: (1) all our names for God are inadequate, and (2) language which names God only as male is idolatrous. While there is considerable disagreement with the second statement, most people affirm the first. Yet, when alternatives to the tradition are suggested, it is the first which is often forgotten. Objections to change rest on the conviction that the traditional form is completely adequate. Can we humbly ask whether this is true?

“Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” best portrays God’s relational nature. For years I nodded. Yes, but then one day, a child within me dared to protest, “No!” There are only two relational names: Father and Son. The third is not relational at all, too impersonal even to be called an orphan. We would need a sister or even a grandson to fulfill the relationship claim!

“Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” does not divide the Trinity into functions. This is a common argument against “Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.” Yet, I would guess that most people believe the Father creates and the Son saves (not vice versa). The traditional names are so closely tied to the three articles of the creeds that separate functions are assumed. The alternative, while inadequate because it changes persons to attributes, is no more divisive.

“Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” is God’s name in Scripture and tradition. This claim must be taken seriously, for a person is baptized into the Communion of Saints. The faith community speaks a certain language and is tied to a particular history. But to insist that this formulation is God’s *only* name goes far beyond the claim of Scripture. Though Luther quotes the Matthean formulation in the Small Catechism, he also warns about formulaic rigidity (Martin Luther, *Selections*, ed. J. Dillenberger [Garden City: Doubleday, 1961] 297-8).

Others again, sticking rigidly to their pedantry, condemn the use of the words, “I baptize thee in the name of Jesus Christ,” although it is certain that the Apostles used that form in baptizing... (Acts 10:28). They refuse to regard any as valid except: “baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.”...The truth is that no matter in what words baptism is administered, as long as it is not in a human name but in the Lord’s name, it surely saves.

To argue that baptism is invalid without “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” moves perilously close to magical incantation rather than remaining gracious proclamation. It is not the formula which saves us; it is God’s grace which saves us.

How can we name this gracious God in ways which more fully reflect the *imago dei*, female as well as male? If we believe that God is indeed male, we won't even try. (Perhaps insistence on a male God arises from a deep, primeval place where taboo and cleansing rites are born. From this unacknowledged space, fear unbidden cries out: "If women have power to give life, then men must claim a greater power: to give life eternal.") But if we have caught a glimpse of God who is female and male, we will move on together.

Our first steps will be taken with language that is not explicitly or exclusively male:

- Luther's affirmation of the Acts form, "I baptize thee in the name of Jesus Christ";
- the triad-form, adapted from 2 Cor 13:14: "You are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit";
- "You are baptized in the name of the Triune God: Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier." Yes, this form is inadequate because it changes persons to functions. Yet, if we can acknowledge that the traditional form is also inadequate, this alternative, which is tied to Scripture and tradition, may be less idolatrous.

But how do we then move toward language which is female as well as male? Here, we must step beyond the use of the literal gifts of Scripture and tradition, while never forgetting them. We must discern what the Word of God proclaims, but which our present words distort or neglect. Such naming may be jarring and disorienting; it may also be faithful and full of wonder.

Hymnwriter Brian Wren proposes "Lover, Beloved, and Mutual Friend" as names which are fully relational, with no need to be gender-specific (*What Language Shall I Borrow?* [New York: Crossroad, 1989] 208-212). Theologian Sallie McFague also moves toward names more fully relational; but she sees the need for female names where only male have been before. She invites us to explore "Mother, Lover, and Friend," while being clear this is not the last word (*Models of God* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987] 78). Both writers claim these metaphors arise from the Word—if not the literal words—of Scripture. But will the community know this God? Probably not. Must we then give up, or could we move ahead by placing the familiar alongside the strange?

- "You are baptized in the name of the Triune God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
Mother, Lover, and Friend
Wisdom, Word, and Breath of Life. Amen."

The community remembers, but also moves toward new vision. The familiar threefold washing is retained. Yes, this language is cumbersome. Yes, some will reject Mother and Lover. Yes, this naming, too, is inadequate as all our naming of God will be. But with the familiar name in our ear, we may begin to hear the Spirit singing a forgotten song. We will not yet see God face to face, but we may begin to see more faithfully.

Baptizing in the Name...

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I bind unto myself today
The strong name of the Trinity
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One and One in Three
(*Lutheran Book of Worship*, Hymn 188)

However it happens—with a meager sprinkling or a sloppy drenching, water and God’s Word join to make new people of us in Holy Baptism. In baptism, as St. Patrick sings, we are “bound” to a name, “the strong name of the Trinity.”

Now, questions have arisen concerning the use of the “Three in One and One in Three”—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Is it good news to be bound to this name? Is not this name so hopelessly male, hierarchical, and exclusive that we would be better off to be bound to some other name for the One Who makes Us New? Can Christian feminists continue to be bound themselves and to bind others to “the strong name of the Trinity” through the sacrament of Holy Baptism?

I believe so. As a Christian and as a feminist I would argue that the trinitarian formula is an appropriate name for God. Saying this, I recognize readily that all names for God are finally inadequate; are limited, metaphorical, and never completely depictive of the mystery that is God. However, I believe there is good reason to retain the trinitarian formula, *especially in the baptismal liturgy*.

1. *To be baptized is to be bound to Jesus*. St. Paul declares in Romans 6:3, 4: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life.” Holy Baptism is nothing less than a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. It is to be joined to a particular God/Human who gives us new life now and an end-time gift of life eternal. Is there something unpalatable about being joined to this one who is Son? Some feminists have wondered if a *male* savior can save women. Further, some suggest the saving of women *by a man* continues the cycle of the victimization of women by men. If the maleness of Jesus were the source of Jesus’ saving power, then such problems would be inescapable. But finally, it is not the maleness of the savior that saves, but Jesus’ humanity redeemed by God that saves. Humankind is particular. Jesus was a particular person. He had to be to be the incarnate Word. We are saved by this particular human’s death and resurrection. So much so, that Martin Luther declared, “Apart from this Man, I have no God.”

I bind this day to me forever,
By pow’r of faith, Christ’s incarnation,
His baptism in the Jordan River,
His cross of death for my salvation,
His bursting from the spiced tomb,
His riding up the heav’nly way,
His coming at the day of doom,
I bind unto myself today. (*LBW* 188)

2. *To be baptized is to be bound to a God who is near.* God as Father. This name of the Trinity produces the greatest of stumbling blocks for some feminists, who worry that the name is exclusively male. Where indeed is the nurturing Mother God of Isaiah and the Psalms in this formula? Others relate the sad experiences of their own fathers who are absent, abusive, domineering, and sources of conditional love. Fatherhood is too often typified by a love that is withheld until exceptional performance unleashes it. God as Father, then, becomes an eternal taskmaster whose moral demands can never be fully satisfied. This is the God Martin Luther wrestled with futility in his early years. Still the question is not: Are other names for God helpful, necessary, broadening, enriching, and biblically grounded? Rather, the question is: Can this name be used with integrity? Indeed, should Christians baptize people into this name? Again, I answer, yes. The God Jesus knew was no eternal taskmaster, no inadequate ego demanding a Son's perfect performance to make the Father whole. The God Jesus knew was a God of radical nearness. There was a relationship of profound intimacy, signaled by the name Jesus used to address God: "Abba." Creator God hardly comes close to describing the relationship Jesus had with God. God was for Jesus Abba, Papa, Daddy. This relationship of intimate trust is given to the Christian in Holy Baptism. We who have been joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus are bold to call upon a God who is as near to us as our very heartbeat and breath. God as Father need not be viewed as a synonym for patriarchy and hierarchy. Seen from the eyes of Jesus, God as Father is a vision of the connectedness with another for which we so deeply long.

3. *To be baptized is to be bound to a new community.* The community into which we baptize in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one characterized by entirely new ways of being in the world. The baptized is one who lives now in Christ, and for whom the distinctions, power systems, and stereotypic ways of seeing have been put to death (cf. Gal 3:28, 29). By the power of this name, new people are raised up for living lives of praise and service, lives empowered finally to be free.

St. Patrick sang it well,

I bind unto myself today
The strong name of the Trinity...
By invocation of the same
The Three in One and One in Three
Of whom all nature has creation
Eternal Father, Spirit, Word.
Praise to the Lord of my salvation;
Salvation is of Christ the Lord! (*LBW* 188)

Feminists can affirm the trinitarian formula in the baptismal liturgy.