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We Believe in One God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

DAVID SELLERY

In the light of objections made by radical feminists to the traditional language of Christian theology, many people are now asking whether there is anything to be gained in substituting the formula, 'Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer/Sanctifier,' for the formula 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit' as an explanation of the Trinity in God. This essay will discuss the theological issues involved and why such a proposal for altering this classical language of faith, as solidified in various ecumenical councils, including the Chalcedonian Definition of 451 (*Book of Common Prayer* p. 864) and the Nicene Creed, and further reaffirmed at the 1991 General Convention of the Episcopal Church, USA (resolution B-033A), could result in 'changing the substance of the Gospel, thereby creating a new religion'.¹ I shall focus on the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity and how the confession of God the Father, in the Son, and through the Spirit as professed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed gives clear expression to the saving grace of God and His mission and message of hope to humanity.

It is important to admit from the outset, that those who seek to substitute the triadic formula ('Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer') for the Trinitarian formula ('Father, Son and Holy Spirit') for the most part are persons who are honestly trying to remove the implications that God is only male and not also female by removing the masculine terms 'Father' and 'Son'. I believe that Garrett Green correctly articulates the essential difficulty that the Church faces today with regard to this question as he states:

In the face of the feminists' challenge, Christian theologians need to insist on a subtle but decisive distinction: God is not male; yet appropriate language in which to describe, address, and worship him is nevertheless masculine. Such masculinity is one grammatical aspect of the paradigmatic biblical narrative through which he disclosed himself to Israel and the Church. Read in context, however, this masculinity turns out to be 'kenotic', an aspect of the divine self-emptying by which God divests himself of all majesty, dominion, and power in order to overcome the powers (masculine and otherwise) of this world.²

In my opinion, it is a commendable goal to deny any assertions that God is only male, and not also female; however, I am convinced that such a change is better accomplished by careful preaching about God and by

pastoral counselling rather than by individuals, on their own initiative, changing the received and authoritative formularies of the historic Christian Church. With this said, let us now turn to the question of the theological issues that such a question as this poses.

Thomas Torrance, in his book *The Trinitarian Faith*, asserts that

the Christian Faith is concerned with God as He is named in Jesus Christ and incarnated in his own Word, so that in Christ we know God as he is in his own inner being, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.³

Torrance's statement may be seen as the basis by which one begins the discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity and the nature of God who is specifically revealed primarily as Father first and foremost and only secondarily as the creator. The task of the early Christian writers was therefore to uphold the notion of the Incarnation of the Son while maintaining the Father's sovereignty. The Credal formulation asserts that God is unchangeable, pure being, and the first cause. Thus, it is the essential nature of God, as Father, revealed in the Son, that may determine how we are to know God in any precise manner.

If one is to understand the profound significance of the way in which the triadic formula diminishes the identity of God, one need only look to the classical articulation of Trinitarian doctrine developed by the Cappadocian fathers. It was the work of the first two ecumenical councils that established that the *Logos*, Jesus Christ, can be and is God, and the Cappadocian fathers also established that this is possible for the Holy Spirit. Thus, the major contribution of the Cappadocians is the doctrine of the coinherence (*perichoresis*) which states that each person of the Trinity exists eternally in relationship to the others and is likened to a dance among three equals in mutual relationship. Such a belief was affirmed within the context of classical biblical monotheism. It was the triumph of the Cappadocians to define the relationships of the Father, Son and Spirit within the Trinity as 'three hypostases in one *ousia* (substance).' Augustine, writing later, would state:

The Trinity is one God, not so that the Father be the same Person, who is also the Son and the Holy Ghost; but that the Father be the Father, and the Son be the Son, and the Holy Ghost be the Holy Ghost, and this Trinity One God.⁴

A word needs to be said about the rôle of the Trinity in relation to us today. Frances Young, in her book *The Making of the Creeds*, asks a poignant question, is the Creed our friend, enemy, or merely a historical burden? Can it, and can its Trinitarian expression, help us today or is it a projection of the ancient Christian world onto our own? If it is an enemy, what would dropping it, or changing the texts (as the triadic formula seeks to do) mean for our Christian self-definition? The question posed with regard to substituting the triadic formula, 'Creator, Redeemer and

Sustainer,' for the Trinitarian formula 'Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,' can in my mind be argued definitively only as leading to loss.

Resolution B-033A of the 1991 General Convention of the Episcopal Church, USA, last summer reaffirmed this Church's insistence that baptism is done with 'water in the Triune name of God: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. Moreover, this is the 'official' position of the Church, as stated in the *Book of Common Prayer*, and insisted upon by our own General Convention, the Church's highest legislative authority. This position was earlier endorsed by the 1985 General Convention in a Resolution declaring that this Church acknowledges no other formula 'as administering Christian baptism'. To describe God only by functions, (such as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier) is to invite comparison with the Sabellian heresy. **This way of describing God is as inadequate and misleading today as it was then, because it replaces the persons of the Trinity by their functions.** This heresy is also known as Economic Trinitarianism because it implies that there are merely three operations within the economy of salvation rather than three eternal persons within the Godhead. This is not the Christian faith we confess in the Nicene Creed. I commend most attempts to use inclusive language when referring to human beings in the Church and I do think we have to teach that God is not sexually male in any physical sense that would imply a superiority of masculine over feminine. But I cannot endorse attempts to change translations of Scripture or the words of the *Book of Common Prayer* that have been chosen only after careful consideration by our Church's highest authority.

The triadic formula is problematic and suspect in many ways but particularly due to its association with the basic tenets of Sabellianism or modal monarchianism. This was a Second and Third Century heresy which held that God is a single unit (monarch) who merely reveals himself in three operations or modes (such as, creator, redeemer, sanctifier). As Father, God created; as Son, God died on the cross; as Holy Spirit, God sanctifies. It was of such a belief that Tertullian wrote: 'They crucify the Father and put the Spirit to flight.' Such a view of the Trinity is said to be 'economic' in that it believes God in Trinity only for purposes of revelation—for the economy of salvation, and minimizes the distinctions of the specific revelation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is a view that has been revived at various times and implies that there is no *Trinity* but only *unity*.

The Creed and the Trinitarian formula do set boundaries for the discussion of faith, outside of which one is no longer 'standing in the tradition'. Moreover, it can also be said that the Trinitarian formula and the Creed serve to remind us of where we have been as the people of God. Important thoughts to consider pastorally in this regard are these: how does the liturgy illustrate the beliefs expressed in the classical Trinitarian formula and the Creed, and how does the liturgy work with the Trinitarian formula and the Creed to express the faith of the community through

history, while at the same time help us to experience anew God's redemptive love in the actions and concerns of our own era? It is in the Athanasian symbol that we see the crystallization of a doctrine of the Trinity which has gained ecumenical acceptance:

And the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal⁵

Thus, the overwhelming testimony bears witness to the fact that much is to be 'lost for the Church in substituting the triadic formula for the trinitarian formula'. Moreover, the various statements from our own General Conventions (1985 and 1991) bear witness to the fact that the theological issues involved are of profound significance. In conclusion, I would have to say that I agree both with Garrett Green and Alvin Kimel on their assessments of the implications of such a change and the theological ramifications. As Alvin Kimel has summarized: 'to abandon or reject the trinitarian naming is to create a new religion, a new God', and I would add, a God unlike the God revealed in the biblical narrative. Only to substitute no more than the function of the Trinity for the persons of the Trinity negates the eternity of the Godhead.

DAVID SELLERY has recently been ordained in the Episcopal Church of the United States of America, from the Diocese of East Tennessee. He is a 1992 graduate of the General Theological Seminary in New York.

NOTES

- 1 Kimel, Alvin F. 'The God Who likes His Name: Holy Trinity, Feminism and the Language of Faith.' *Interpretation*, XIV, No. 2 (April, 1991), p. 158.
- 2 Green, Garrett. 'The Gender of God and the Theology of Metaphor.' (as yet unpublished).
- 3 Torrance, Thomas F. *The Trinitarian Faith*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988). p. 7.
- 4 Augustine, *De Fide et Symbolo*.
- 5 *Quicumque Vult, Book of Common Prayer*, p. 864.