

## THE BAPTISMAL FORMULA, FEMINIST OBJECTIONS, AND TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY\*

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### PRECIS

Some churches in the U.S.A. and Canada have recently undertaken study of the baptismal formula, occasioned by various liturgical experiments that dispense with the traditional formula of Mt. 28:19. In most cases the liturgical variations are motivated by the concern for sex-inclusive language; however, discarding one of the few practices that the churches have in common creates a difficult ecumenical situation.

This article begins by examining feminist objections to the baptismal formula; then, from the standpoint of trinitarian theology, it examines whether the language of "Father, Son, and Spirit" really supports a masculine view of God. The thesis of the article is that, while the trinitarian tradition, like the Bible, is *both* the source of revelatory truth about God *and* a powerful resource for patriarchal culture, it is unnecessary to repudiate the baptismal formula as inherently sexist and patriarchal. It concludes with a theology of baptism in which baptism is understood, first of all, as creating the possibility of living right relationship and, second, as being the source of power by which the people of God can become an inclusive community.

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### *Introduction*

In Canada and the United States, recent liturgical experimentation with the baptismal formula has raised the concern that altering the traditional wording may invalidate the baptisms received and so jeopardize ecumenical recognition of baptisms administered under a different rubric. In the history of theology and church life, liturgical innovation is certainly nothing new and cannot *a priori* be ruled out. At the same time, it will be to everyone's advantage if liturgical questions are pursued in a manner that is theologically informed as well as pastorally sensitive.

The specific reason given for changing the baptismal formula centers on the name "Father" in the phrasing of Mt. 28:19. Those in favor of dispensing with the formula claim that this word denotes a masculine God and that, in the pursuit of an inclusive community of worship, all such exclusive terminology should be avoided. Some of the proposed alternatives include: baptism into the name of the Parent, the Christ, the Transformer; baptism into the name of the Father/Mother, the Child, the Spirit; baptism into the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier; baptism into the name of the Trinity.

The most interesting and significant theological discussions are those prompted by liturgical or other ethical-pastoral crises. As Maurice Wiles wrote about the Arian crisis, people "do not normally feel so deeply over matters of formal doctrinal statement unless those matters are felt to bear upon the practice of their piety."<sup>1</sup> My point of entry into the subject of baptism and the current pastoral problem is trinitarian theology. Although this field has the reputation of being antiquated or obsolete or, even worse, purely speculative and not relevant to sacramental and other ecclesial concerns, I hope to show that the doctrine of the Trinity is quite useful indeed for helping us to think about both the meaning of baptism and the precise meaning of divine paternity.

Since it is feminist theology that has most trenchantly criticized the baptismal formula, I begin with an overview before exploring the meaning of baptism "into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

#### *I. Some Concerns of Feminist Theology*

Feminism is the critique of patriarchy in its sociological, psychological, linguistic, political, literary, and religious-mythic-symbolic manifestations. Patriarchy may be defined as a system of social relations in which the male is normative and in which the male-female relationship is one of domination and subordination. The language of patriarchy puts the strong, that is, the male, at

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<sup>1</sup>Maurice F. Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine: A Study in the Principles of Early Doctrinal Development* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 62.

the forefront and excludes or eclipses the weak, that is, the female. Religion perpetuates patriarchy insofar as it masculinizes God and conceives of God's relationship to the world as analogous to man's relationship to woman. Man is created first, and woman is created out of man; God is head over man, and man is head over woman.

The feminist critique of Christian religion is that, by its symbols, myths, and thought-forms, Christianity serves to maintain the social world of hierarchy and lack of equality between men and women.<sup>2</sup> Theological feminism exposes the extent to which the gender and attributes of the Christian God are male-centered, especially the attributes of the trinitarian God. In 1881 the suffragist Matilda Joslyn Gage put it starkly:

All the evils that have resulted from dignifying one sex and degrading the other may be traced to this central error: a belief in a trinity of masculine Gods in One, from which the feminine element is wholly eliminated.<sup>3</sup>

Feminist scholars have produced an enormous corpus of writings that is by no means monolithic. There is disagreement on nearly everything, including principles, goals, and political strategy. Still, theological feminism is sometimes roughly divided into two types: revolutionary and reformist.

Revolutionary feminism (for example, Mary Daly<sup>4</sup>) views Christianity as hopelessly corrupted by the patriarchy that produced its sacred texts and nourished its social world. The chief symbol of patriarchal Christian religion is the personification of God as male, especially in the doctrine of the Trinity. The constant use of masculine symbols for God in Christian ritual creates, maintains, and reinforces a patriarchal mind-set that can be escaped only by pursuing an altogether new religion, either Goddess-religion or some other post-Christian cult. Consider this argument in which the hierarchical social relations of church, family, and society are viewed as the mirror image of a hierarchy within the Trinity:

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<sup>2</sup>See Carol P. Christ's summary of an earlier stage of feminist theology in "The New Feminist Theology: A Review of the Literature," *Religious Studies Review* 3 (October, 1977): 203-212. More recent writings in feminist theology include Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); Naomi R. Goldenberg, *The Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon, 1979); Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

<sup>3</sup>In Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 4 vols. (New York: Fowler & Wells, Publishers, 1881; repr. — New York: Arno and *The New York Times*, 1969), vol. 1, p. 796.

<sup>4</sup>Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973); idem, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon, 1978).

... the husband stands in relation to the wife as God the Father does to the Son, co-equal in dignity, but as Initiator to Responder. The wife, holding the position analogous to the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, thus is characterized by response, submission, obedience.<sup>5</sup>

It is obvious who stands to benefit from this arrangement. What may not be so obvious to everyone is that this argument contravenes not only theological feminism but also to some extent orthodox trinitarian theology. Still, revolutionary feminism would see no value in the project of this article since baptism is regarded as nothing more than ritual initiation into the evils of patriarchy.

Reformist feminism (for example, Rosemary Ruether, Letty Russell, Patricia Wilson-Kastner, Phyllis Trible) instead feels obliged to maintain some continuity with the Christian tradition, while criticizing and reforming it from within. Some reformist feminists search for an uncontaminated core of Christian truth, a "canon within the canon." This sub-canon can be a text such as Gal. 3:28, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female," or the canon can be a living one, such as the person of Jesus Christ who included in his ministry all the oppressed. Other reformist feminists articulate a feminist "hermeneutics of suspicion" and warn against an elitist and Platonized "timeless essence of revelation" theory. They urge that we admit and wrestle with the fact that the New Testament is both a source of revelatory and liberating truth and a resource for patriarchal culture and its "plausibility structures."<sup>6</sup>

A word is in order about my own method. What I will be proposing is not the dogmatic equivalent to the biblical canon within the canon, as if there were some pristine liberating message contained within but free of the bias of androcentric trinitarian texts. Rather, the trinitarian tradition, like the Bible, is *both* the source of revelatory truth about the mystery of God *and* a powerful resource for patriarchal culture. On that basis I am proposing that the baptismal formula and trinitarian theology need not be repudiated as inherently sexist and patriarchal. Baptism can be seen as a powerful symbol of the liberating relationships promised by Christ and realized in the reign of God. Baptism has the power to create a community based on interdependence, mutuality, and reciprocal love and self-sacrifice, which are the leitmotif of theological feminism. To be sure, baptism is subject to the distorting effects of ideology and sin. Although baptism is entry into a new social order, because it joins us to the collective history and identity of the Christian community over time, it is entry into a social world that has not always exemplified what it professes to believe. The androcentric application of baptism in the social and canonical dimensions of the church, in which male and female still co-exist under patterns of inequality

<sup>5</sup>Robert Rice, in his foreword to Nancy Cross, *Christian Feminism* (Front Royal, VA: Christendom Publications, 1984), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup>Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, pp. 7-36, esp. p. 33.

and domination, runs contrary to the promise and power of initiation into the life of God.

The simple observation that doctrine and practice are often as far from each other as are women and men is not an invitation to complacency. Elisabeth Fiorenza says of the Bible that "the source of our power is also the source of our oppression."<sup>7</sup> Adapting her remark to our context and reversing the phrasing, how true it is of baptism that "the source of our oppression is also the source of our power." In what follows I would like to give theological justification for this judgment by utilizing several aspects of the trinitarian tradition.

## II. Preliminary Questions for Theology

(1) Is God male? Hardly anyone would seriously defend this, despite the fact that most call God "he" and many people adamantly refuse to call God "she," even part of the time. As Gail Ramshaw Schmidt has pointed out, in American English, grammatical gender has been replaced by natural gender; unlike other languages that assign gender to inanimate objects, in English only living females are "she," and only living males are "he." Therefore, calling God "he" inevitably denotes male sexuality, despite every disclaimer to the opposite.<sup>8</sup>

All theology affirms that the reality and glory of God exceed the limits of impoverished human language. God cannot be named in the way that created realities can be named, because God can be grasped only in the regions of love, which lie beyond images, words, and thoughts. According to the apophatic approach or the *via negativa*, every statement we make about God must be negated; we must say what God is not as well as what God is. If we assert that God is just or wise, we must add that God is not just or wise measured by human justice and wisdom.<sup>9</sup> If we say that God is father, God is also unlike a father because God is neither male nor female.<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary writings on the topic of God-language frequently cite the principle that "God is beyond all names" and that the essence of God is unknowable. Feminist theologians use this principle of negative theology to cut through what they consider to be an improper equation between divine fatherhood, which is one aspect of God's way of relating to us, and the divine essence,

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>8</sup>Gail Ramshaw Schmidt, "De Divinis Nominibus: The Gender of God," *Worship* 56 (March, 1982): 126-129.

<sup>9</sup>This is the apophatic dimension of the analogical tradition.

<sup>10</sup>Deborah Malacky Belonick has argued in "Revelation and Metaphors: The Significance of the Trinitarian Names, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, vol. 40, no. 3 (1985), pp. 31-42, that the names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit belong neither to apophatic nor to kataphatic categories, i.e., that the divine names indicate neither divine essence nor divine attributes. They are, she says, "personal terms by which humanity enters Trinitarian life to discover the unique persons of the Trinity and their distinguishing marks" (p. 35). She does not indicate what the status is of "personal terms."

which is beyond all relationship. Even those who would most vigorously defend the fatherhood of God have been forced to admit that divine fatherhood in no sense is comparable to human fatherhood in its obvious and ineluctable maleness; to suppose otherwise would be to violate the basic theological principle that God cannot be conformed to any created reality. Those who insist on masculine pronouns for God apparently do not grasp this point.

Regardless of what we think about God's fatherhood, the current liturgical crisis prompts us to examine the extent to which we may have identified God the Father of Jesus Christ with God the Father of the patriarchal social order. Feminist theologians have reminded us of our propensity to literalize metaphors for God and to forget the dissimilarity in every analogy. Since the richness of God cannot be fully encapsulated in any one root-metaphor, this recommends utilizing a full complement of God-images, masculine as well as feminine, personal as well as impersonal.

(2) Is God the Father male? Since every human father we know is male, when we use father as an analogical term for God we risk forgetting that the analogy works by *dissimilarity*, not similarity between human and divine fatherhood.

The meaning of God's fatherhood was at the heart of the Arian controversy of the fourth century. The early church acknowledged that speaking of God as Father could be misunderstood, as Arius did. The premise of Arianism was that God (and here Arius meant God the Father) is absolutely transcendent and unoriginate, the source of all reality who alone is unbegotten, eternal, without beginning. Godhood could not be shared with nor imparted to anyone, not even to Christ. If the Father had a Son of the same nature or substance, there would be two gods. Arius regarded Christ as a creature, higher than other creatures but still less than God. The logic was impeccable, provided one understood "father" as a synonym for the divine substance (*ousia*).

In their struggle against Arianism, Athanasius, Hilary, and especially the Cappadocians (Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus) supplied a carefully articulated theology of divine fatherhood that was thoroughly christological, trinitarian, and, above all, relational. They regarded "Father" as the name not of the divine substance but of the divine relatedness. "Father" is a *personal* name of God; God is Father not in a general or universal sense (like Zeus or Jupiter) but in a personal sense: God is Father of Israel by election; God is Father of Jesus Christ by generation. Arius had conceived of God as a deity who could not consort with finite and created matter and who therefore needed intermediaries (such as Christ) to accomplish the divine plan in the world. Athanasius and Gregory and others defended the utter immersion of God in the world in the person of Jesus Christ and understood God's fatherhood from *this* perspective, but to rebut adequately the position of Arius required that they develop their own understanding of what it meant to call God Father. In the process, trinitarian theology as you and I know it came into being.

Prior to the fourth century, in the New Testament, in early Christian theology, and in early Christian creeds, "Father" had been synonymous with "Godhead" and did not carry an "intra-trinitarian" meaning.<sup>11</sup> "Father" was the name of the Creator of the universe who, though source of all that is, is without source or origin. Monotheism was the same as monarchy (one principle); the divine monarchy belonged solely to God, that is, to God the Father. However, in the trinitarian context, divine fatherhood came to be understood also in terms of God's relationship to God, in addition to God's relationship to the world. This is the import of the clear distinction made by the end of the fourth century between the generation of the Son and the creation of the world.

The Cappadocians held that there are two meanings to divine paternity: Father means "coming from no one" (*agennesia*, or unbegottenness), but Father also means "Father in relation to the Son" (Begetter).<sup>12</sup> However, such words as begetting and unbegotten, generate and ungenerate, do not tell us what the essence of God is; they name an aspect of God's face turned toward the world. Likewise, the title "Father" does not give any information about the nature or qualities of divine fatherhood.

The brilliant insight of the Cappadocians was to use the title Father as a way to secure the essentially relational and personal nature of God, over against the view of the Arians that "Father" was a generic name for a God altogether removed from the world. However, several literalizing tendencies threatened the proper use of this name of God. Part of the Arian argument was that Christ must be inferior to God if God is truly a Father, for sons always come after their fathers; no son exists before his own generation. Arius, it has been remarked, did not know a metaphor when he saw one.

The Cappadocians exploited the metaphorical and analogical meaning of fatherhood. Even though it was impossible to define the content of God's fatherhood, Gregory of Nazianzus ridiculed his opponents who thought that God was male because God is called Father, or that deity is feminine because of the gender of the word, or that the Spirit is neuter because it has nothing to do with begetting. Not only philological but also materialistic conceptions were ruled out: God's fatherhood, Gregory tells us in the same homily, has nothing to do with marriage, pregnancy, midwifery, or the danger of miscarriage.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Even though the Father of the universe was understood to be the Father of Jesus Christ, at the time the Old Roman Creed was formulated (second half of the second century) the special eternal relationship of God to Christ, Father to Son, had not yet been formulated in "intra-trinitarian" terms. Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1950), pp. 131-139.

<sup>12</sup>For general background, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1958); George Leonard Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1952); Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). Some of the writings of the Cappadocians are available in English translation in the *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* series.

<sup>13</sup>Gregory of Nazianzus, "The Fifth Theological Oration: On the Holy Spirit," para. VII, in

I see some parallels between what was at stake in the fourth century and what is at issue in the current controversy over the fatherhood of God.

On one side of the discussion are those who argue that, because Jesus called God Father, God *is* a Father, "he" must be called Father and that, if God had wanted to reveal "Himself" as a Mother, God could have done so. This dogmatic position outruns exegesis and supposes a kind of arbitrariness about revelation. Certainly Jesus called God *Abba*,<sup>14</sup> although estimates of the centrality of this address often are exaggerated. The word *Abba* belongs to the family context and was a startlingly personal and intimate revelation of God by Jesus, which is why abstract substitutions like "Parent" tend to fall flat in worship. By addressing God as *Abba*/Father we are using a term of intimacy that was undeniably a characteristic feature of Jesus' own prayer. The import of the two liturgical texts in which the word *Abba* occurs, Rom. 8:15 and Gal. 4:6, is that through the Spirit we are given access to the one whom Jesus called *Abba*.

Moreover, just as the early Christian community did not infer the uniqueness of Jesus' sonship solely or directly from the *Abba* (and *pater*) texts but from a more comprehensive view of Jesus, so also we cannot deduce the masculinity of God (which is what divine paternity is sometimes reduced to) directly from the fact that God was called *Abba* by Jesus. Great care is required to move from a term of invocation and prayer to a divine attribute. "God the Father" in the sense of "Father of Jesus Christ" is a specific and personal way to name God, not an indefinite name for the divine essence. This view, it must be remembered, led to the downfall of the Arians. The Arian position failed ultimately not because it lacked intellectual power but because the God who was Father in a generic, nonrelational sense, not the Father of Jesus Christ in an intensely personal sense, did not fit with Christian instincts about worship. A God whose utter transcendence prohibited traffic with flesh or human history could not evoke praise from Christians whose faith was centered on Christ. What many have pointed out recently is that a God who is thought to be masculine as defined by patriarchal cultural and social patterns is also not worthy of worship.

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Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *A Select Library of Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, series 2, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, n.d.), p. 320.

<sup>14</sup>See the classic studies by Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York, Scribner, 1971); and idem, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Naperville, IL: A. R. Allenson, 1967). Also see Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1979), pp. 256-271; Witold Marchel, *Dieu Père, dans le Nouveau Testament* (Paris: Cerf, 1966); and idem, *Abba, Père, La prière du Christ et des chrétiens*, *Analecta Biblica* 19 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1963); H. W. Montefiore, "God as Father in the Synoptic Gospels," *New Testament Studies* 3 (November, 1956): 31-46; James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980); Johannes-Baptist Metz and Edward Schillebeeckx, eds., *God as Father?* *Concilium* 143 (March, 1981) (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, Ltd.; New York: Seabury Press, 1981); James Barr, "'Abba Isn't 'Daddy,'" *Journal of Theological Studies* 39 (April, 1988): 28-47.



In contrast to those who see “Father” as the proper name of God and as coterminous with the divine essence are those who reject outright all Father-language because they find it to be poisoned by the ideology of patriarchy. Some feminist scholars see unitarianism as the only viable corrective to a masculinized Trinity. However, to refuse ever to use “Father” as a personal name for God concedes that God the Father is male as patriarchy has defined it. It also duplicates the unitarianism of the Arians. Patriarchy is a unitarian monotheism, as opposed to a trinitarian monotheism where the centerpiece is God’s kenotic self-revelation in Christ.<sup>15</sup> The total identification of God with Jesus the Son, even unto death on a cross, makes it impossible to think of God as the distant, omnipotent monarch who rules the world just as any patriarch rules over his family and possessions. The “God brought low” in Jesus is the God whose face is seen in the poor and brokenhearted, not in the exalted and powerful. The trinitarian God is eminently God for us, whereas the unitarian God is eminently for himself alone. Thus, unitarian feminism unwittingly runs the danger of looking rather like patriarchal unitarianism! As I am proposing here, one can affirm the doctrine of the Trinity without implying that God the father is male.

Perhaps this is the place to comment on why “Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer” is not always a satisfactory substitute for “Father, Son, Holy Spirit.” If we make relationality a feature of God’s face turned toward us but are agnostic about whether the essence of God is also this way, we have not successfully avoided unitarianism. Functional or modalist language can emphasize the individuality and separateness of the divine persons and contribute to the impression that there are “three” (that is, numerically three) somethings or someones, each of whom is responsible for different aspects of redemption. This does not accurately reflect the fact that *God* creates, *God* sustains and sanctifies us. (God also does more than create, redeem, and sustain.<sup>16</sup>)

Further, Creator-Redeemer-Sustainer language does not adequately reflect the language and view of Scripture that God creates *through* the Son (Col. 1:16; Heb. 11:3; Jn. 1:1-3) and *by* the Spirit (Gen. 1:1-2) or that God redeems us *through* Christ (2 Cor. 5:19; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14). Because persons are more than what they do, such functional or modalist language as the Creator-Redeemer-Sustainer trilogy is not in every case an exact equivalent of the uniquely *personal* name, “Father, Son, Spirit.” I say this not to provide evidence for those who wish to preserve a literal or masculine rendering of the trinitarian

<sup>15</sup>See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, tr. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row; London: SCM Press, 1981); and *idem*, “The Motherly Father: Is Trinitarian Patripassianism Replacing Theological Patriarchalism?” in Metz and Schillebeeckx, *God as Father?*, pp. 51-56, esp. p. 53.

<sup>16</sup>While it is true that the Bible sometimes assigns (“appropriates”) certain functions to one of the divine persons (e.g., Christ is called Savior [e.g., Acts 5:31], and the Spirit is called Counselor and Teacher [e.g., Jn. 14:26]), more often than not a variety of actions is mentioned in connection with each name (e.g., sometimes Christ is called Savior, and at other times God is called Savior [e.g., Lk. 1:47; Jn. 4:42; Acts 5:31; 1 Jn. 4:14]).

name but to emphasize that distinguishing persons by their function with respect to us does not sufficiently highlight the personal and relational character of God *as God*. The strong and bold claim of trinitarian theology is that not only is God related to us, but it is the very *essence* or *substance* of God to be relational.<sup>17</sup>

These criticisms notwithstanding, it is crucial that liturgical, pastoral, and systematic theologians continue to explore new ways of addressing God in public prayer. While changes in language, especially liturgical language, are not cosmetic, at the same time there is ample precedent<sup>18</sup> for making emendations for the sake of worship *and* for the sake of better conforming to contemporary experience. How we pray, how we ritualize faith, how we name God—express our deepest longings, hopes, beliefs, and convictions. How we address God is an index not only of how we view God but also of how we view ourselves in relation to God, God in relation to us, and ourselves in relation to each other. Language that hurts or language that excludes or language that legitimates the subordination of any group should be changed.

The fatherhood of God is today, as in antiquity, susceptible to the gravest distortion and misunderstanding. It is significant that we are exploring this question in the context of baptism where we are concerned with lived, not theoretical, relationships. It is precisely by living *in Christ* that we meet the real Father whom Jesus proclaimed and are enabled to give up our fantasies, Oedipal or patriarchal or other, about the content or program of God who is the father of Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup>

(3) Is the Trinity male? If God is neither male nor female, and if God the Father is neither male nor female, then the Trinity is also neither male nor female.

"Trinity" is a shorthand expression for that most profound and recondite mystery of God that is revealed in the events of salvation history; this mystery consists of God's offer of total incorporation into divine life. Obviously, we are severely limited when we try to express anything about this mystery, since its contours are unpredictable and its final form has not yet been realized. Trinitarian theology is the effort to seek out characteristic patterns of the

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<sup>17</sup>There is a tendency in some process trinitarian theologies to avoid the question of relatedness as an aspect of God's life as God ("inner life"). See, e.g., Marjorie Suchocki, "The Unmale God: Reconsidering the Trinity," *Quarterly Review* (Iliff School of Theology), vol. 3 (1983), pp. 34-49; and W. Norman Pittenger, *The Divine Trinity* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1977). For an alternative, cf. Catherine M. LaCugna, "The Relational God: Aquinas and Beyond," *Theological Studies* 46 (December, 1985): 647-663.

<sup>18</sup>In the fourth century, Basil heaped upon his own head all manner of controversy by daring to tamper with the great doxology—from its original form, "to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit," to the form "to the father with (*meta*) the Son and with (*sun*) the Holy Spirit." I have argued elsewhere that, by retrieving the original form of the doxology, patterned after salvation history, the intent of Creator-Redeemer-Sustainer language could be met while at the same time calling attention to the profoundly personal and relational nature of God (cf. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "Making the Most of Trinity Sunday," *Worship* 60 [May, 1986]: 210-224).

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Claude Geffré, "'Father' as the Proper Name of God," in Metz and Schillebeeckx, *God as Father?*, pp. 43-50.

divine-human relationship, focusing on our common human destiny, which is union with God and communion with each other. Trinitarian theology is not concerned with providing an abstract metaphysics of God's "inner life" but with elaborating the essentially personal and relational nature of God. Trinitarian reflection must always be anchored in our communitarian life in Christ and the Spirit, which is why liturgy recommends itself as a starting point for trinitarian thought.

The images, metaphors, and analogies used to illustrate the mystery of God's relational love have been predominantly, though not exclusively, masculine. The Father-Son analogy was prominent because it was well-attested in Scripture, especially in John's Gospel. Compared to analogies drawn from the material world, such as sun-ray-light, the Father-Son analogy conveyed the personal character of God and also the equality of God and Christ: just as human fathers and sons share the same human nature, so the divine Father and Son share the same divine nature. Further, since in antiquity the male was thought to be the active agent in "bringing forth" new life, it was understandable that God who creates the world and generates a son be called Father.

Several analogies could effectively be used to depict God's self-relatedness, including Mother-Daughter, Father-Daughter, Mother-Son, Lover-Beloved, Friend-Friend. Some of these are not unknown in antiquity; for example, Clement of Alexandria<sup>20</sup> and others speak of God's maternal love and of the Father who nurses with milk from the breasts of his goodness. However, the maleness of Christ and the androcentrism of culture militated against these analogies' becoming prevalent or dominant.

Some recent writers have highlighted the so-called feminine characteristics of the Holy Spirit as another way to bypass the masculinity of trinitarian images.<sup>21</sup> There is an important distinction to be made between feminine attributes for God and feminine images that express a mode or style of relationality.

On the one hand, to call the Holy Spirit "she" as a way to redress the one-sidedness of Christian imagery for God concedes the very point that cannot be conceded, namely, that God the father and God the Son are both "he." God the father is as much "he" as "she," which is to say not at all. Moreover, the presence of feminine imagery for God in the Bible or in some mystical writers is insufficient grounds to establish that there are feminine "aspects" to God. Masculine and feminine characteristics tend to be sex-stereotyped, either by

<sup>20</sup>See *Pedagogue*, I, IV, 34, 3-38, 3.

<sup>21</sup>See Robert Murray's discussion of the evidence in Syriac literature, in *Symbols of Church and Kingdom* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 312-320; and Pieter Arie Hendrik DeBoer, *Fatherhood and Motherhood in Israelite and Judean Piety* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974). More recently, see Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (New York: Seabury, 1983), vol. 3, pp. 155-164; Franz K. Mayr, "Trinitatstheologie und theologische Anthropologie," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 68 (November, 1971): 427-477; and Donald L. Gelpi, *The Divine Mother: A Trinitarian Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984).

biology (giving birth) or by behavior (being compassionate). Feminine and masculine imagery should be viewed as expressions of intimacy with God, not as a determinant of the sex or bisexuality of God. The point here is that God is not basically masculine with a feminine side.

On the other hand, male and female are intrinsically relational terms. Our creation in the image of God as male and female refers to the inherently *relational* character of our humanity and of divinity, not to *sex per se*. Therefore, relational terms used *in divinis*, such as father or son, or Spirit as Mother, should be taken to indicate the essential relationality of God and indicate different modes in which that relationality can be expressed, not the sex of God.

The fact that the question of the sex of God or of the divine persons can be asked displays the weakness of some Christian thought-patterns that do not adequately distinguish between relational metaphors and divine substance. What is intended as a corrective, namely, feminine imagery for God or for the Holy Spirit, can fall into the same literalizing tendency as masculine imagery. A sufficiently apophatic use of feminine as well as masculine imagery can free the Christian community, not only in how it imagines God but also in how it images God in the patterns of its community life.

The point of all such theological constructs is to communicate certain basic truths about God: that it is the essence or heart of God to be in relationship; that there is no room for inequality or hierarchy in God; that the personal reality of God is the highest possible expression of love and freedom; that the mystery of divine life is characterized by self-giving and self-receiving; that divine life is dynamic and fecund, not static or barren. Theologians today should explore many different relational trinitarian analogies.<sup>22</sup> An interesting precedent has already been provided by the Eleventh Council of Toledo in 675 C.E., which stated that the Son was begotten "*de utero Patris* (from the womb of the Father), that is, from the substance of the Father."

A trinitarian (soteriological) approach to the mystery of God makes it possible, I believe, to move "beyond God the Father" of the patriarchal social order and back toward God the Father of Jesus Christ. Like theological feminism which seeks to recover nonpatriarchal revelation in the Bible, trinitarian theology provides a way for a traditional doctrine, which certainly has been a resource for patriarchal culture, to become also a source of revelatory truth about the mystery of God. Reflecting on the meaning of baptism

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<sup>22</sup>Cf. Gail Ramshaw Schmidt's proposal for "Abba, Servant, Paraclete" in "Naming the Trinity: Orthodoxy and Inclusivity," *Worship* 60 (November, 1986): 491-498. Also see Rebecca Oxford-Carpenter, "Gender and the Trinity," *Theology Today* 41 (April, 1984): 7-25; Mary Collins, "Naming God in Public Prayer," *Worship* 59 (July, 1985): 291-304; Letty Russell, "Inclusive Language and Power," *Religious Education* 80 (Fall, 1985): 582-602; Barbara Brown Zikmund, "The Trinity and Women's Experience," *The Christian Century* 104 (April 15, 1987): 354-356; Gracia Grindal, "Reflections on God 'the Father,'" *Word and World* 4 (Winter, 1984): 78-86; Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ*, esp. chap. 6.

and envisioning how inclusive community might look thus proves to be one appropriate starting-point for uniting theology of baptism and theology of God.

### *III. Baptism into the Triune Name of God*

Baptism is incorporation into Christ by the power of the Spirit and, therefore, entry into covenant with God and with each other. Christ alone brings down the Spirit upon us (cf. Mk. 1:8), cleansing us from our sin, sanctifying and justifying us (1 Cor. 6:11; Acts 22:16; Heb. 10:22), making us members of the *ekklesia*. Baptism is an eschatological gift, a foretaste of the true destiny of all creation, a promise of what it is like to live in the reign of God. Its fruits, however, are realized only imperfectly and unevenly in the course of human history.

The ethical implications of baptism have always been acknowledged.<sup>23</sup> Because of new life in Christ and the Spirit, previous patterns of relationship are to be re-ordered and re-configured. Unity in Christ and the Spirit makes it possible to transcend the dictates and unfreedoms of culture, ignorance, prejudice, and intolerance. Paul wrote in Col. 3:5-10 about what it means to be perfected by baptism in the image of God:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you once walked, when you lived in them. But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off [that is, in baptism] the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image [*eikon*] of its creator.

The passage closes in v. 11:

Here [that is, in Christ] there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free [person], but Christ is all, and in all. (*R.S.V.*)

Baptism changes also our relationship to God. By the Spirit we become part of the family of God, sons and daughter of God able to address God as intimately as did Jesus when he called God "*Abba*" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). As sons and daughters of God we are heirs to everything to which Christ is heir, including being glorified by God. It is actually the Spirit bearing witness within us who enables us to call God "*Abba*." One sign that we live in the Spirit is that we dare to call God by this intimate term of address. A further sign that it is the Holy Spirit of God and not another spirit by which we speak is that we do not allow

<sup>23</sup>See the 1982 ecumenical statement, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

the content of that divine fatherhood to be determined chiefly by our private imaginations or needs or culture.

The conferral of the name of God upon us signals the end of an identity defined solely by nationality, gender, race, sexual preference, marital status, economic class, et al., and the beginning of new identity in the *ekklesia* or Body of Christ. Baptism into the name of “the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit” means incorporation into the power and essence of God, into the history and story of God, into the life and heart and identity of God.

Personal names carry personal histories. To be sure, we do not know the name of God who is above all names, since knowing the name of God would mean having control over God. Still, we do name God on the basis of salvation history. God’s name is God’s face turned toward us in the promise to be with us in covenant fidelity. For Judaism, the salvation-history name of God is the Tetragrammaton “YHWH”; for Christians, it is “Father, Son, Spirit.” “Trinity” is not a name either of God or of God’s history with us but an abstraction into which we cannot be baptized.

Living “in the name of” someone else or being blessed into another’s name means being incorporated into their personal history. Through baptism we surrender ourselves to transformation by a personal power that promises to restore in us the disfigured image of God. The disfigurement is personal as well as collective; as much as we are to become “a new creation” in Christ, so too is the community of Christ to acquire a new profile, one in which “Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:10).

Trinitarian theology is especially helpful in thinking about the nature of God into whose life and personal identity we are engrafted. God is not a static and impersonal “force” but is profoundly relational, dynamic, passionate, fecund, ecstatic. The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that God is alive as *communion*; God’s tri-personal reality is characterized both by the *mutuality* of perfect self-giving and self-receiving and by the *freedom* that derives from being self-sacrificing, inclusive, compassionate love. God who moved the heart of Isaiah, who spoke to Hagar in the desert, who healed the man blind from birth, who spoke the word of revelation to the Samaritan woman—this God is no respecter of social status but in the person of Jesus Christ welcomes all into the reign of God as equal partners.

#### IV. Trinitarian Life in the Church

Most churches share in common the trinitarian baptismal formula based on Mt. 28:19. It is a criterion for orthodoxy and therefore of mutual recognition. It is essential that all the churches examine their own theologies of baptism and baptismal practice and submit themselves to the scrutiny of ecumenical dialogue. Only in this way might we realize the goal of visible unity in the church.

However, important as doctrinal agreement may be, the ultimate criterion of orthodoxy is the lived expression of what we undertake and undergo in baptism. The purpose of creeds, doctrine, and even the baptismal formula is doxological. In every confession of faith and in every act of worship we speak the language of praise, not of theory. Ecumenical dialogues would do well to keep in mind that creeds, doctrines, and the baptismal formula are only prelude to orthodoxy, not its full expression.

The fullest expression of orthodoxy is to be found in the life of individuals and communities.<sup>24</sup> Lives of self-sacrifice (by men as well as women) and generous service glorify God. The community glorifies God when it gathers together in the Spirit in whom all differences are acknowledged and embraced. Baptism that becomes an empty gesture or a legal requirement or one more reason for division does not glorify God but becomes the antithesis of all that it symbolizes.

The one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church is called to be a credible witness and sign in the world of new life in Christ. Its vocation is to embody in its teachings and words and actions, in its ecclesial structures and ritual gestures, in its internal patterns of relationship (*koinonia*) and its service to the world (*diakonia*) the new nature that its members put on in baptism and that is gradually being conformed to the image of the Creator. The doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that in God there is neither hierarchy nor inequality, neither division nor competition, but only unity in love amid diversity. The Christian community is the image or icon of the invisible God when its communitarian life mirrors the inclusivity of divine love. The church is to be one in "the unity of the Holy Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3).

Paul goes on in vs. 4-6 to say that

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. (R.S.V.)

It would be revolutionary, indeed, if the churches could confess one baptism and one God and Father, because it would require that we give up our fictions about who this God really is, who best images this God, who is nearer to this God, who best knows the mind of God. To confess one baptism and one God and Father is potentially a strong protest against and countersign to patriarchy, as well as to racism and every other kind of false valuation of some persons over others. To confess one baptism would require a collective act of humility by which we would begin to see ourselves as much more like than unlike those who are different from us, have different opinions, or practice different customs. We would begin to see ourselves in the commonness of our humanity, where grace breaks in and scatters disagreements. To confess one baptism is, in effect, a

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<sup>24</sup>Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford give a fine explanation of this point in *Praising and Knowing God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985).

recipe for compassionate love. Like God, the Christian individual should be able to reach beyond one's own self to embrace even the enemy and the unattractive other.

### *Conclusion*

Living what we promise in baptism and becoming a community of inclusiveness ultimately may have less to do with language than with ourselves. It is perhaps easier to see language as the culprit than to admit to the ways in which all of us, men and women, fall short of our obligation of charity to each other. Obviously, language shapes worlds of meaning and creates social systems. Therefore, language needs continual reform, and we need to be scrupulously self-critical about how we use it. At the same time, commitment to inclusive language must be matched by commitment to inclusive community. The offensiveness of exclusive language should be one more inducement to self-examination, confession of sin, conversion of heart, and reconciliation with each other.

The current controversy over the language of the baptismal formula is, I believe, motivated by genuine concern for the integrity of baptismal promises; it is not the hobby-horse of a "special-interest" group. Theological feminism invites the Christian community to examine its liturgical and doctrinal formulae of faith, but, more important, it challenges the church to examine its life. Baptism into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit means renouncing all that keeps us from the love of God, everything that denigrates the full humanity of all persons, everything that selectively adjudicates who receives the fullness of salvation.

It must be admitted frankly that to become or to remain a member of the church — and especially to undertake baptism into the name of "the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit" — will continue to be an experience fraught with tension, anguish, and profound ambivalence for many. It is difficult *not* to hear a patriarchal Father-God lurking behind much of the church's public prayer. This, however, is not the God into whose life and name we are baptized, as trinitarian theology helps to make clear.

Still, fine theological distinctions rarely have an immediate impact on religious symbols and liturgical practices, and it would be naive to think that rational explanation ever brings about conversion of hearts. One outcome of the current discussion seems to be that all of us are consigned to live with the pain of many in the churches whose full personhood has been diminished by, of all things, prayer. However, we affirm our belief that "the source of our oppression is also the source of our power." The power of baptism can never be altogether reversed by the sin of the church, any more than the grace of baptism can be undone by our own personal sin. This is what shows baptism truly to be incorporation into the very life of God.