

Speaking the Christian God

*The Holy Trinity and the
Challenge of Feminism*

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Naming the One Who Is above Us 110-19
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work, we would, I would hope, be much more sensitive to the demonic possibilities in our own speech about God and much less inclined to optimism about our own linguistic innovations.

All of which is to say that in our speaking of and ultimately for God, we should be aware that the true art of the theologian is to learn — as the Reformers insisted — to speak an entirely new kind of God-talk: gospel-talk. But gospel-talk arises only out of the actual conquest of law-talk in the death and resurrection of Christ. Gospel-talk arises out of the trinitarian narrative alone. “Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified” (Rom. 10:4). The true task of theology, therefore, is to be aware of the way the language works and how to use it. Theology is not the art of erasing unpleasantnesses but the art of an ever-renewed speech that conquers sin, death, and the devil. Theologians are supposed to distinguish between law-talk and gospel-talk and have some idea of how they work and how to get from one to the other. They are supposed to know how to speak not just ABOUT God but FOR God.

The Revealed God

To sum up, when left to ourselves, we are not very good at naming God. We manage only to arrive at abstractions that choke and kill us. So God must undertake to make a name for himself, to do the reconciling by himself. So there was a man named Jesus, sent from God, who came among us and named God “my Father” — indeed, even “the Father” — and invited us to pray with him to this God as “our Father.” We should not imagine that this naming of God was received either with approval or with great joy. Quite the contrary. Of the Gospels, John sets forth most profoundly what is involved in the problem of naming God. It is pointed out that Jesus’ compatriots sought to kill him “because he not only broke the sabbath but also called God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (5:18). And in the end, to put the matter directly, he was killed for calling God his Father: “We have a law, and by that law he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God” (19:7). But he was raised from the dead. The Father vindicated him, establishing his authority as the Son. What is established thereby is the specific and intimate relation between the Father and the Son. The Father can be understood only in terms of the relation to the Son: God is the Father of Jesus Christ. As we read in John, “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the

bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (1:18). The Son, in turn, is the perfect revelation of the Father. The Son can do and does "only what he sees the Father doing" (5:19). That is, God is not to be named in analogy to human fathers, not in terms of abstractions like "fatherhood," but only in relation to Jesus Christ. The name God acquires for himself is strictly and exclusively "the Father of Jesus Christ," and one can rightly call God "Father" only as one is properly related to the Son (8:41-44). Indeed, in Matthew's Gospel we are exhorted to use the designation "Father" exclusively for God: "Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven" (23:9). Whatever difficulties we have with the name can be resolved only in the light of the relation between the Father and the Son. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not in our minds or in our linguistic innovations.

But is it not possible to substitute other less offensive names or metaphors? This is the question that hangs over us today. I have already attempted to show in the preceding discussion of the hidden God that it is ultimately a futile exercise. Now, however, we have the fact of the revealed God to take into account. Accordingly, a number of things must be added to the picture.

First of all, we have to do with revelation in time, through historical particularity. We have to do with a Jew in first-century Palestine who called God his Father and who has invited us to pray on his warrant (in his name) to God as our Father. This man was raised from the dead by "the Father." We need no longer "trouble deaf heaven with our bootless cries." We have been given an address for our pleas. That, at the outset, is the most important fact we have constantly to bear in mind. Nothing can or need change that now. There is no exhaustively necessary reason we can cite to show why Jesus should have used this language. The fact is simply that he did. If Jesus had called God "the Mother" or "the Great Spirit" or any number of other things, we would no doubt be obligated to that. But he didn't. It is as with the Lord's Supper. There is no reason, ontological or symbolical or otherwise, why one must use bread and wine outside of the historical fact that that is what Jesus used, and so must we — unless, of course, we want to do it in forgetfulness of him. To assume, as many have and many still do, that we can proceed by analogy and say that the elements can be changed in order better to counter current objections, moral and otherwise, is to deny the historical particularity of the gospel and to turn it into an abstraction.

Second, the texts themselves yield some data that should not be

ignored. The New Testament identifies God as Father 261 times. By contrast, for instance, God is referred to as “creator” or “creating” in some fashion only 14 times. Of course, this is not to say that the New Testament does not believe in God as creator. It is to say, however, that that is not the distinctive burden of its message. Indeed — and thirdly — the fact that God is so consistently referred to as the Father of Jesus Christ rather than just as creator is no doubt intentional. It is intended to counter prevailing views in Hebrew Wisdom literature (e.g., Proverbs, Ben Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon) which maintained that the creator is known through the Torah.¹¹ In other words, the battle about whether to name God “creator” or “Father” was joined at the outset. “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). That God is “creator” no one disputes, but that is something of a mixed blessing. That God is the Father of Jesus Christ is good news.

So in the end it all comes down to a matter of the gospel. The one who is above us is simply an intractable problem for us. We cannot penetrate or remove the threatening masks behind which God absconds. But in the person of Jesus in his historical particularity, God is revealed. He dies for us. If we are antipathetic toward God, God bears it all in Jesus. God goes out of the way for us, refuses finally to be a God of wrath for us. But this is possible only in the concrete historical person of Jesus. It is only in him that we are reconciled to God. Only in him do we find God the true Father of us all. This is not a general truth. Jesus does not propose better names for God accessible to all and sundry. For Jesus not only dies but also is the death of us — the death of the old being who cannot speak the truth about God. To be found in him is to die to all else so that one might live to God. Thus the historical particularity belongs to the essence of the gospel. The gospel is that the God with whom we endlessly contend dies for us. That can only happen concretely, historically. But if God dies, we die as well. And then our hope is in Jesus, who was raised by the one whom he called “my Father” and invited us to call “our Father.” This historical particularity means simply that we have no other chance, and, indeed, that we need no other. And only if that is so for us have we encountered the one who is truly above us.

11. My colleague Donald Juell has advanced this thesis in an article entitled “I Believe in God: A Johannine Perspective,” soon to be published in *Horizons*.