

Theology Matters

A final copy of the report, “The Trinity: God’s Overflowing Love” with line numbers corresponding to those in the following articles can be found on the *Theology Matters*’ web site, www.theologymatters.com.

A Name is Not a Metaphor: A Response to “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing”

by Andrew Purves and Charles Partee

Every Christian is a martyr. Not in the sense that we must all die for our faith but in the original meaning that we must all bear witness to Jesus Christ as Lord. Testifying thus, most Christians assume they actually refer to the God revealed in Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit. This affirmation denies the claim (at its strongest) or the suggestion (at its weakest) that theology is really anthropology. Prayer to God is not self-reflection and proclamation of the gospel is not cheerleading. God hears and God speaks.

Seeking to confess the faith aright by protecting the ineffable mystery of the scriptural revelation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the church affirms the doctrine of the Holy Trinity—not the doctrine of the Holy Simile. If these statements are true and if theology really matters, as we believe, then this Report is seriously—if not fatally—flawed.

A reminder from the First Theological Oration of Gregory of Nazianzus (written between 379 and 381) puts all of our theological reflections into a proper perspective.¹ According to Gregory, our talk concerning God is a holy and pious work. “It is not the continual remembrance of God that I would hinder, but only the talking about God; nor even that as in itself wrong, but only when unseasonable; nor all teaching, but only want of moderation.... Let us philosophize within our proper bounds, and not be carried away into Egypt, nor be swept

down into Assyria, nor sing the Lord’s song in a strange land.... Let us at least agree upon this, that we will utter Mysteries under our breath, and holy things in a holy manner.... But let us recognize that as in dress and diet and laughter and demeanor there is a certain decorum, so there is also in speech and silence; since among so many titles and powers of God, we pay the highest honour to the Word. Let even our disputings then be kept within bounds.”

The Christian doctrine of God, and especially how we speak concerning God, is a debated and contentious subject in both the church and the theological academy. The purpose of the paper, “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing,” however, is not a response to controversy over the doctrine of the Trinity, but to its neglect. The authors are both right and wrong. Mainline Protestantism is functionally Unitarian rather than Trinitarian in its understanding and practice of worship, as James B. Torrance superbly shows in his important little book, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*.²

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There is indeed neglect of the Christian doctrine of God; and there is also the failure to understand the dynamics of Christian faith, life, and ministry precisely as Trinitarian. But affirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity is inherently controversial, and political, because it stands over and against all Deistic, religious, and cultural perspectives on God. We trust in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three Persons, one Being, not in some vague generic and nameless deity, somehow applicable to all religions, for each to name as seems helpful or appropriate. Much is at stake whether we think that the Christian doctrine of God is just a Christian naming of the shared God, or a reference to God who cannot be named in any other way because that is *how God has named himself* in scriptural revelation. Further, it is wrong to suggest that there is no significant controversy in the church concerning the doctrine of the Trinity. The long-standing debate over so-called inclusive language for God is indicative precisely of controversy concerning the core of what it is that Christians confess regarding God. To suggest otherwise is to valorize and normalize so-called inclusive language for God, begging the question by slipping a certain conclusion under cover of the assumption that the debate is over.

The Report begins with the assumption that it is necessary to seek “fresh ways to speak of the mystery of the triune God” (line 88) because we must fulfill the imperative to engage in “constructive theological reflection” (line 91). Otherwise, apparently, the church will not renew its faith in the Triune God. No reasons are given for this conclusion, but finding fresh ways to speak concerning God is what the Report intends to do. The bounds within which the Report pursues its goal are ostensibly biblical, but there is a serious flaw embedded within the theological method used in the Report, namely, a misunderstanding of analogy with regard to the nature and reference of theological language, and especially language concerning the name of God. The authors of the Report needed to say much more about the nature of theology, and especially how it is that we can use words and images derived from human experience to refer with some accuracy to God, a transcendent subject. The authors seem to assume that *all* theological language concerning God—both name(s) for God and images of God—is taken to function metaphorically. That is to say, all theology can say is that God is like... (fill in the blank). Now, while some theological language for God works that way, under certain controls (not mentioned in the Report), that is not the case for all language that intends to refer to God, especially the name of God, as we shall see in due course.

The Report begins its journey into error with the section “Three in One, One in Three” (line 282f), not for what it actually says, but for what slips into the discussion without explanation. For the first time the difficult word “analogy” is used, with reference to ways of thinking and speaking concerning the Triune God. The reader is not told how the authors intend to use analogy in theology, why analogy is necessary, or of alternative perspectives on analogical reasoning in theology. Nevertheless, a specific and singular understanding and use of analogy is

henceforth employed as the core theological method throughout the remainder of the Report.

The following two sections of the first part take us to the heart of the problem. The titles of the sections: “Naming the Triune God” (line 308) and “A Plenitude of Images of the Trinity” (line 384) seem to assume name and image are the same. Or, to put it pointedly: with reference to the First Person of the Trinity, is the Father a name or an image, and if a name, how does it ‘work’? Moreover, in the section “Naming the Triune God,” at lines 360 and 364, in successive paragraphs, the report slides seamlessly and confusedly from “trinitarian names” to “female imagery.”

According to our reading, the most important sentence in this Report is, “all language about the triune God refers beyond itself by way of analogy...” (line 385). The slide from revealed names to images flows from the authors’ use of analogy in a particular sense. Having discussed this use and its consequences, we will offer an alternative construal of analogy in theology, and show what it means for theological speech concerning God.

A core assumption of the Report is that God is rightly referred to in images, none of which must be reified. Of course we have no other option than to speak concerning God in language that has a referent in human experience. All statements carry the freight of social construction. All theological language is in some manner inherently metaphorical. However, the question remains: Given the categories available to us, is our language concerning God really talking about God or are we necessarily limited to human meanings derived from human experience? To put the question even more pointedly: Does God speak? Can we really say, “Thus saith the Lord”?

The Report suggests that because we are anchored to the traditional language concerning God, and given the desire for an image-rich imagination and vocabulary concerning speech about God, we are, apparently, free to adopt new images and names for God. Is the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, an image, and as such is it replaceable by other images for God? Is this traditional naming of God redundant or replaceable or to be improved upon? The Report argues that “we should not insist on the exclusive use of the traditional trinitarian names,” (“names”!) for fear that we “would neglect the freedom of God’s children to glorify God imaginatively” (line 362) or even foster idolatry! (line 360). So: it is now about our freedom to imagine God! God, apparently, should have many names! That is a road down which the PC(USA) has already made a fruitless trek.

The assumption of the Report seems to be that the content and meanings of names and images for God, albeit that they are biblically inspired, are filled in from our side. That is, all so-called knowledge is a social construction. The names and images for God function analogically, pointing us to the mystery of the Triune God, but, as God is a mystery, the assemblage of names and images have

limited theological utility. Thus, presumably, the names and images need to be changed now and then as human experience and location change. These names and images are metaphors that stretch our imaginations to conceive in some manner that which is not reducible to images. Thus God is like a father, or a mother, or a shepherd, and so on. God is like a son leads to *the metaphor* (myth?) of God incarnate. But metaphors come and go; they may work well for a while; over time they lose their capacity to amplify speech and thinking. Whatever metaphor for God is employed, the reality on which it rests is not God, but our human experience and language. The Report concludes our language can only point to a mystery the language cannot itself connect with; at worst, God really remains hidden, speechless, and unknown. If God is really mute concerning himself and his name, then we can invent God in our own image, or in the image of the relevant ideology to which we feel drawn. We have here the smiling face of Friedrich Schleiermacher behind which is the looming dark shadow of Immanuel Kant.

In contrast to the position adopted in the Report, we offer a positive statement on the use of metaphors in speech concerning God and on the name of God in which our language is not limited to social construction and collapsed thereby into necessarily relative subjectivism. The Report, it seems to us, undercuts and finally rejects the view that we can know God and can speak concerning God because God has graciously given himself to be known by us within the compass of our language, and which knowledge we enter into by faith, which is the result of our union with Christ. We believe that our language concerning God has its source in God's address to us as the man Jesus, son of Mary, as that is attested by Scripture, to whose risen and ascended life we are joined, and not in our reading our experiences and concepts back into God. T. F. Torrance has noted that "the very beliefs which we profess and formulate as obediently and carefully as we can in fidelity to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ are themselves called into question by that revelation, *for they have their truth not in themselves but in him to whom they refer.*"³ This is only the case, of course, if God has actually spoken a word concerning himself, albeit a word co-opted from human experience.

First, God names himself. The authors of the Report cite Exodus 3:14-15 (line 231) and Romans 8: 15b-17a (lines 192-193). To this we add Galatians 4:6: "And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" Jesus said, "pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven..." (Matthew 6:9). And so on and so on. How does analogy work in these cases? Are Jesus and Paul telling us that God is like a father, the meaning of which is derived from our human experiences? We do not believe so. Rather, "Father" here is to be understood as entirely a name that subsists within the Father-Son relationship. While it is a word drawn from language and human experience, its theological reference is pulled away from that ground to rest upon a foundation that derives from the becoming (*sarx egeneto*) of God for us in, through, and as Jesus of Nazareth. The ground on

which we speak out the name of God is beyond all contingent reference and experience; the ground is God himself, God for us and in himself (the economic and the immanent Trinity). Let us put it this way: the meaning of "Father" begins within the framework of experience. That much is obvious. But as through our union with Christ our minds enter repentantly and transformationally, that is, sanctifyingly, into the depths of the Father-Son relationship, that metaphorical meaning is allowed to slip away as much as possible, to be replaced by a theological meaning increasingly controlled by the being and truth of God as we know that in Jesus Christ. The naming of God is to be understood according to an analogy of confession, grounded in our participation in the human life of the ascended Jesus, which is the gift of grace and the work of the Holy Spirit. Our speech concerning God is the fruit of our union with Christ. Everything, and especially our naming of God, is rooted in Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit in our union with him whereby we share in his human Father-Son relationship.

The claim is not that God is reducible to our language concerning God, or to the name of God. The words "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" are not themselves God. God is not contained in the language, but while the words have metaphorical anchorage in human experience, making them closed, as it were, from our side, they are open ended in their reference because they have a ground in God's self-revelation and our union with Christ. They 'work' in such a way that we are directed away from the human reference to their God reference, and are filled in, as it were, from our participation in the Father-Son relationship in the power of the Spirit.

It is important also to make a brief point here concerning critical realism in theology. Realism, broadly, is the view that there is a real world 'out there' which in some manner can be more or less known. Critical realism develops a certain epistemological restraint, recognizing that we can never finally, totally, or completely know something, because there is always a subject who knows, but who knows subjectively. So we can speak of objectivity but never of objectivism. Things can be known, more or less faithfully, in the 'space' between knower and reality. In theology, 'truth' lies in the relationship between God's self-revelation, our union with Christ, and our own reflective lives.⁴

What is at stake here? Nothing less than Jesus' hypostatic identity, the *homoousios to Patri* of the Creed, and our union with Christ are in danger of being lost in a solely metaphorical naming of God. Or, to put that the other way round, if we lose our hold on the classically-developed Christological center of the gospel, we not only lose the ground for our language for God, we in fact lose the Trinity. We lose God! It would be overly harsh to say that that is where the Report leads us. But the danger lurks because of the failure to protect the ground of the real name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Second, there are many biblical images for God that appropriately function as metaphors. And it is right to employ the full range, as the authors of the Report recommend. But even metaphorical images must be controlled as far as possible from God's side of the analogical relationship, as it were. Consider the beloved 23rd Psalm: The Lord is my shepherd. Clearly God is not to be thought of here as a Scottish shepherd with a Border Collie running at his heels. This is a metaphor, not a literal representation. Rather, God is like a shepherd, who cares for the welfare of the sheep, keeping them safe and providing good pasture. The image is evocative. It stretches our understanding analogically, taking the meanings from one set of relations—shepherd and sheep, and invites us to consider the relationship between God and ourselves in its light. But what happens when the analogy is understood solely from within our experience. Consider: why do shepherds farm sheep? They are farmed certainly for wool. But they are farmed also to sell the sheep to the slaughterer! The farmer is concerned with the price he can get for, and the quality of, Sunday dinner. The analogy breaks down viciously. To maintain its utility, the analogy has to be grounded in something other than our experience.

A metaphor works when there is an appropriate reference redirection. It begins from a ground in human experience. But there must come a point where the reference changes, having its ground in God and not our experience of human shepherds. (How many people have experienced a non-metaphorical shepherd is another question.) When that turn to a ground in God occurs, the mimetic reference back to the previous ground begins to slip away, and an imageless reference to God takes its place. The image functions iconically, as we apprehend through the image the reality of God who is not reducible to that image. We might call this the apophatic aspect of images for God. Thus, the Lord as my shepherd begins to lose its ground in our human experience of shepherds, and gets to be filled in more and more with theological content controlled by the whole message of the gospel, as we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. We doubt that the ground of the image in human experience slips away entirely. Rather, the metaphor continues to work precisely because of the tension within which it is situated between God and human language and experience.

The conclusion we draw from this discussion is that the Report offers a perspective on the doctrine of the Trinity that falls short of what is needed if the doctrine of the Trinity is to be received by Presbyterians as "good and joyful news" (line 75). Having tilted its hat in the direction of Three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, One Being, it goes off in search of something more interesting to say— "fresh ways to speak of the mystery of the triune God" (line 88). This seems to us to be a contemporary restatement of Acts 17:2: "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new." We think it would have been more valuable to have

developed at significant length how it is that we can understand the church's historic confession of the Triune God of grace. We do not need a diluted, metaphorical Trinity; rather, we need our confidence in the Christian doctrine of God restored and to be led, with all the saints, to the truly joyful acclamation of the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

¹Citations are Oration from 27.5 in NPNF. 2nd Series, volume 7.

²James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1966). See also Andrew Purves *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) where it is argued that the same problem has also afflicted the theology and practice of ministry.

³Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 18/19 Emphasis added.

⁴See Alister E. McGrath's extensive presentation of critical realism in *A Scientific Theology*, 3 volumes, *Nature* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001); *Reality* (2002); *Theory* (2003).

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Missing the Depths: A Critique of “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing”

by Gerrit Dawson

In this essay, I will argue strongly that “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing” (TGLO) should be rejected by the 217th General Assembly. Succinctly, TGLO is replete with mishandling of historical texts while inadequately addressing or neglecting altogether several foundational sources. Both of these missteps advance an agenda away from deeper consideration of the Father-Son relationship that is at the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity. The so-called “rich and varied imagery” which TGLO encourages actually leads to a depersonalizing of the Triune God and leads us to liturgical shallows, impoverishing us from the riches of historical doctrine. TGLO was produced by a special work group under the auspices of the Office of Theology and Worship. TGLO has been six years in the making. Its full text may be found at www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/issues/trinityfinal.pdf or www.theologymatters.com. Meaningful analysis of TGLO, however, needs to be set up by an introduction to key scriptural sources for the doctrine of the Trinity.

Introduction: The Source of Trinity

The word *Trinity* is nowhere to be found in Scripture. The phrase is a theological term employed to describe and preserve what we know of God. So what makes us think that God is Triune? There is only one answer: because this is the way the Father made himself known through his Son Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. And how do we know *that*? Only through the scriptural accounts of both the life of Jesus and the witness of the apostles after Pentecost. These accounts are, of course, corroborated by the experience of the believing community in worship and mission as we are brought into living, dynamic fellowship with both the first witnesses and the Triune God himself (I John 1:3-4). Which of the many events and teachings Scripture recounts are key to seeing the Triunity of God? Four, at least, are foundational.

1) **The Baptism of Jesus** is a major Christian feast throughout the world, especially in the Orthodox Church where the Sunday of Jesus’ baptism is known as *theophany* and regarded as considerably more important than the coming of the magi. This is because at Christ’s baptism, for the first time, all three Persons of the

Godhead are revealed to be at work at once. The incarnate Son goes under the waters, consecrating his ministry in obedience to his Father. Upon rising from the waters, the heavens are opened and the Spirit descends like a dove. Then a voice sounds, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22, cf. Mark 1:9-11; Matthew 3:13-17; John 1:32-34). The baptism in water is linked to the baptism in blood on the cross (cf. Luke 12:50), and in both cases the sinless Jesus is acting in our name and on our behalf. The act of baptism signifies our being linked to Christ’s baptism. This is the external image of our invitation into the very life of the Triune God. The inner aspect will be revealed in John 14-17, as we will see below.

2) **Matthew 11:27, Jesus’ Unbroken Oneness with The Father.** Early in his ministry, Jesus expressed a deep intimacy with his Father. He said, “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matthew 11:27; cf. Luke 10:22). The Father and Son have an exclusive knowledge of each other. Their relationship forms the basis for how we understand that Jesus, as incarnate Son, is divine, and thus how it is that there are persons within the Godhead. The presence of this passage in the best-attested manuscripts of two synoptic gospels corroborates the fuller expression of this Father-Son relationship in John.

3) **John 14-17, The Last Discourse and High Priestly Prayer.** These passages take us into the heart of this union between Jesus and his Father. Jesus told Phillip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. Do you not believe that *I am in the Father and the Father is in me*? The words I say to you, I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that *I am in the Father and the Father is in me*” (John 14:9-11). The Father and his incarnate Son Jesus are so close that they may be said to dwell in one another. Then, we see how that love opens out to include us as the Holy Spirit, a third divine person, is introduced. Jesus said:

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees

him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. (John 14:15-20)

Further teaching on the Holy Spirit indicates how he shares in the intimate knowing of Father and Son. Jesus said that the Spirit's work is to "take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:14). But Jesus adds in the next sentence, "All that the Father has is mine." Jesus has already declared that he, "the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing" (John 5:19). Thus we see a mutual giving of the three Persons to each other, and the Triunity of God is revealed in such love.

4) Acts 2:32-33, Peter's Pentecost Sermon. Following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, Peter preached to the multitude. He proclaimed the story of Jesus in ministry, of Jesus crucified, risen, and ascended. Then he explained what that history reveals of God and its implications for us: "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are witnesses. Being therefore exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing" (Acts 2:32-33). The Father gives the Spirit to the Son, the ascended Jesus, who had already given himself in obedient service to his Father. Jesus pours the Spirit out upon the apostles. Throughout, the blessed Spirit gives himself to be given. Thus we receive a glimpse of this lovely Triune communion which has opened out not only to include us but to redeem us.

Upon such passages as these, the Church built her doctrine of the Trinity, always recognizing that the doctrine was not the reality but meant to enshrine the precious revelation we received in Jesus Christ. The primary speech remains the revealed language of Scripture. Abstract theological reflection upon Scripture is important, particularly in giving us the boundaries of faithful interpretation, but such theological discourse is ever and always less than the truth-revealing character of the scriptural words themselves.

TGOL: Where's the Depth?

Frankly I can't imagine trying to teach faithfully the doctrine of the Trinity without reference to and deep consideration of the above passages. Yet in its theological section, *TGOL* barely mentions the baptism (line 176, without reflection) and avoids Mt. 11, John 14-17 and Acts 2:32-33 altogether. My training as a literature major taught me always to inquire about the impact of what is *not* being said in an essay as well as what is proposed. These omissions are extremely telling. They are also stunning. How could a task force with several professional theologians writing a paper that is to be the

major study piece on the Trinity for our denomination fail even to probe the meaning of such essential passages? *TGOL* claims to "plumb the depths of scripture for rich and varied imagery" (lines 86-87). Yet the document fails to explore these most foundational texts in any sustained way.

But is this just my personal bias? Am I upset because *my* favorites weren't chosen and other fine passages were? How I wish that were the substance of my complaint! Sadly, I believe these passages were *not* selected precisely because they take us so explicitly to the relationship between the Father and the Son that is central to the New Testament. *TGOL* shoots a trajectory that leads the church *away* from using the primary speech of Father and Son. In spite of the paper's protestations that it is ever anchored to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (ll. 330-44), a bias against this reality pervades the document. As a result our "liberation" in language actually sends the church from the depths to the shallows. The paper fails to lead the church toward the heart of the Triune reality.

This mistake of neglect is so obvious it is embarrassing to mention. Good piano teachers do not instruct their students in improvisation until basic chord structures are learned. Coaches do not teach one-handed leaping catches until thousands of repetitions of basic catching have been taught. The questions then arise, "Has the Presbyterian Church already been sufficiently trained in the depths of the Father-Son-Spirit relationship that *TGOL* may play variations in language without considerable exploration of the foundation? Would any of us suffer from the boredom of redundancy if the basic texts had been addressed?" Hardly. The classic material is *new* material to the vast majority of us. We are not properly taught about Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are not ready to move on to variations, or even consider why, or if, they are needed. The paper's acknowledgement of Father, Son and Spirit as our "anchor" is insufficient because that anchor remains below the surface of consideration. The reason such an anchor actually tethers (let alone creates, enlivens, sustains and pulses through) all discussion of the Trinity is not explored.

In this essay I will demonstrate that this bias away from the Father-Son relationship exists by examining:

- 1) Lapses in scholarship which lead to an inexcusably poor use of cited material. This includes altering of quotations, truncating of quotations from Scripture, and use of quotations from theologians for purposes strongly out of context with the authors' larger argument. Tellingly, nearly every alteration tilts in a direction *away* from historically orthodox expressions of the Father and Son.
- 2) Changes made between drafts of the paper which reveal movement away from naming and considering the Father and the Son.
- 3) Missteps in theological reflection which follow from the above and then find expression in liturgical forms.

1) Lapses in Scholarship

Writing this section goes against my grain as a lover of theology and Bible study. I don't want to spend several pages appearing pedantic as I point out mistake after mistake in *TGOL*. Yet I dare say that if presented with a paper so full of "alterations," the very professors who are authors of *TGOL* would return the paper for serious correction or reject it altogether. The accumulation of errors all points in one direction, so much so that an agenda is revealed. In fact, the presence of so many inaccuracies and changes breaches trust with the reader. How can I believe what people will say who use historical sources with such revision and not mention that they are doing it? Did the work group think no one would check their references? Scholars simply may not alter texts to read the way they desire. The task of scholarship is to take historical material on its terms, not our own.

It is both embarrassing and tedious to enumerate the following. But such unraveling is necessary to reveal a bias so tightly woven into the paper that it might otherwise escape conscious detection even as its purpose has its effect on readers.

A. Altered Quotations, Incorrect Citations

As we begin, I acknowledge that members of the work group may argue that some of what I call alterations occur when Scripture is cited as a source but not directly quoted. Thus their reading would not be an alteration. While that may be technically correct, the questions remain, "Why do you prefer your paraphrase to what the text cited actually says? What understanding does your paraphrase promote and why is that consistently away from historical Father-Son articulation contained within the actual source?"

1) Lines 196-7 quote (yes, setting words off in a separate paragraph, even without quotation marks, is quoting) from the *Confession of 1967*. The opening word of the sentence has been altered from "This work of God" to "The work of God." Without further examples of altering, this instance might seem innocuous. Yet the sum total of revised quotations in *TGOL* causes us to examine each one. The use of "The" is declaratory and may simply begin a thought concerning "The work of God" in general. The use of "This" would ordinarily send the reader to a prior statement, asking "Which work of God do you mean?" If we had been directed to a prior statement, what would we have seen? A clear articulation of the Father-Son relationship that is the foundation of Christ's saving work! "He is the *eternal Son of the Father*¹, who became man and lived among us to fulfill the work of reconciliation." This redirection navigates us away from the Father-Son relationship.

2) Lines 365 discusses "the biblical depiction of God" as "beloved child." Mt. 3:17 is cited, which in the Greek clearly refers to a *son*.

3) Line 379 speaks of "the child of God" though the context of the two passages cited clearly refers to a son. Is. 9:7 is quoted concerning the justice he brings; Is. 9:6 declares that "unto us a son is given." Though *TGOL* here cites Luke 2:46-55, in as much as Luke 2 only has 52 verses, it is clear that Luke 1:46-55 is meant, a passage known as the *Magnificat*, in which Mary glorifies the Lord who caused her to conceive the *Son* of God (explicitly stated just 11 verses earlier in Lk. 1:35).

4) Line 381 cites John 3:30-6 as referring to being born again of the Spirit of God, though that discussion is actually much earlier in the chapter.

5) Line 381 describes the Spirit's work with a reference to Is. 46:1-4 but that passage has the LORD as a referent rather than the Spirit of the LORD who is mentioned in, for example, Isaiah 61.

6) Lines 396-7 cite Romans 11:36 as the source for "the One from Whom, the One through Whom, and the One in Whom" we offer praise. The actual Greek text is properly rendered with masculine pronouns, as all major English translations do, "For from him and through him and to him are all things." Granted, *TGOL* is not making a direct quotation, but its rendering deflects the reader from the reality that the language of revelation uses masculine pronouns for God.

7) Lines 410-11 cite Isaiah 49:15 in support of declaring that "the triune God is Compassionate Mother." In fact, the LORD does not describe himself as a mother, but speaks of his remembering of his people as *exceeding* the love of a mother for a child.

8) Lines 410-11 cite Mt. 3:17 as the source for calling God the "Beloved Child" when the proper rendering is "My *Son*, the beloved."

9) Line 417 cites James 1:17 as the source of the description of God as the Giver. I do not dispute the use of the term "Giver," but must note that James 1:17 speaks of the "*Father* of lights" as the source of every gift.

10) Lines 1579-1587 quote Ephesians 3:16-19. "God's glory" has been inserted instead of "*his* glory," though the Greek text explicitly uses a masculine pronoun. Also, *TGOL* renders "God may grant" though there is no *theos* in the Greek text. Similarly, the proper translation would be "through *his* Spirit," not "the" Spirit. *TGOL* quotes Scripture in the way it desires it to have been written rather than according to what the Bible actually says. This is especially troubling considering that *TGOL* takes pains to bracket "We" when altering vs. 16's "I" to be more inclusive. Why not be forthcoming about alterations throughout?

11) Line 1490 renders "The LORD" as "The Lord," perhaps a typo but typical of the failure to recognize the

significance or plumb the depth of the Name God has himself revealed, as I shall discuss in section 3 below.

B. Truncated Quotations

1) Lines 230-1 quote from Exodus 3:14-15. Every major English translation (including the *NRSV* which is the English Bible used throughout *TGOL*), renders the divine name in all capital letters, as “I AM WHO I AM” or “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE.” Curiously, *TGOL* renders it in lower case letters, giving the effect of a descriptive phrase rather than a unique name of the particular God. Further, left out of the quotation is the LORD’s insistence that his name be linked to his historical relationships and activities as “the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” In avoiding such male reference, *TGOL* also misses those historical relationships which reveal the God of Israel as a particular and not a generic deity.

2) Line 805 cites Eph. 4:4-6 to assert that in baptism we affirm “one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God”—and then fails to finish the quotation by including the next phrase, “one God *and Father* of all.”

3) Lines 1579-1587, as noted above, quote from Ephesians 3:16-19. In a document in which length is clearly not an issue, one wonders why Paul’s prayer and doxology have been shortened at the beginning and end. Not surprisingly, in the verse before *TGOL* begins quoting, Paul says, “For this reason I bow my knees before *the Father...*” And the prayer ends with doxology “to *him*.” Readers are being shielded from the reality of the language of revelation that does not suit the agenda of the paper.

C. Inadequate Referencing, Improper or Neglected Context

1) Lines 349-50 assert that Trinitarian language has been used to support the idea that God is male and men are superior without one shred of documentation (the idea that God is male would be nowhere found among the major patristic or Reformation theologians—this is a “straw man”). It also asserts that hierarchies are necessarily oppressive without any scriptural source. *TGOL* thus uncritically adopts a feminist reading of theological history in a paper purportedly written for the whole denomination.

2) Line 366 declares that a “biblical depiction of God” is as a “life-giving womb.” Is. 46:3 is referenced. That passage actually refers to the *action* of YHWH in creating, bearing, carrying and saving his people. To suggest that we then call YHWH “life-giving womb” is to miss the referent. Proper interpretation means that in praising the particular, personal God who has revealed himself uniquely as YHWH, we describe his loving, mighty works partially in terms of womb-nurture. We do not thereby call him a womb. The difference between verb and noun is not inconsequential.

3) Lines 369-76 give the fullest reference in the paper to Calvin, in which Calvin notes God’s comparison of himself to a mother and that “no figures of speech can describe God’s extraordinary affection.” Yet the paper fails to note that Calvin nowhere suggests calling God Mother or Womb in liturgy, and everywhere affirms the name of Father.

For example, look at just three references to the Father from Calvin’s *Institutes*.

a) First, at the very threshold we meet what I previously mentioned: we ought to offer all prayer to God only in Christ’s name, as it cannot be agreeable to him in any other name. **For in calling God “Father,” we put forward the name “Christ.”** With what confidence would anyone address God as “Father”? Who would break forth into such rashness as to claim for himself the honor of a son of God unless we had been adopted as children of grace in Christ? He, while he is the true Son, has of himself been given us as a brother that what he has of his own by nature may become ours by benefit of adoption if we embrace this great blessing with sure faith. Accordingly, John says that power has been given to those who believe in the name of the only-begotten Son of God, that they too may become children of God [John 1:12]. **Therefore God both calls himself our Father and would have us so address him.** By the great **sweetness of this name** he frees us from all distrust, since no greater feeling of love can be found elsewhere than in the Father. Therefore he could not attest his own boundless love toward us with any surer proof than the fact that we are called “children of God” [1 John 3:1]. But just as he surpasses all men in goodness and mercy, so is **his love greater and more excellent than all our parents’ love.** Hence, though all earthly fathers should divest themselves of all feeling of fatherhood and forsake their children, he will never fail us [cf. Psalm 27:10; Isaiah 63:16], since he cannot deny himself [2 Timothy 2:13]. For we have his promise: “If you, although you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father, who is in heaven” [Matthew 7:11]? Similarly, in the prophet: “Can a woman forget her... children?... Even if she forgets, yet I shall not forget you” [Isaiah 49:15]. (*Institutes* 3.20.36)

b) **For he is not only a father but by far the best and kindest of all fathers,** provided we still cast ourselves upon his mercy, although we are ungrateful, rebellious, and forward children. And to strengthen our assurance that he is this sort of father to us if we are Christians, he willed that we call him not only “Father” but explicitly “our Father.” It is as if we addressed him: “O Father, who dost abound with great devotion toward thy children, and with great readiness to forgive, we thy children call upon thee and make our prayer, assured and clearly persuaded that thou bearest toward us only the affection of a father, although we are unworthy of such a father.” (*Institutes* 3.20.37)

c. To sum up: under the name “Father” is set before us that God who appeared to us in his own image that we should call upon him with assured faith. And not only does the intimate name “Father” engender trust but it is effective also to keep our minds from being drawn away to doubtful and false gods, permitting them to rise up from the only-begotten Son to the sole Father of angels and of the church. (*Institutes* 3.20.40)

In short, if one is going to bring in Calvin for reflection on the Triune God, it is only proper scholarship to acknowledge and express the overall thrust of his teaching, rather than use one section to advance an agenda Calvin himself would not have approved.

4) Line 423 cites Eph. 2:20-21 to call God our Temple while failing to see that Eph. 2:18 is the controlling phrase, concerning access to *the Father*.

5) Line 426 cites Mt. 10:34 to call God the Sword that Divides while failing to note the context which is the equating of acknowledging Jesus with Jesus’ acknowledging us before his “*Father* who is in heaven” (Mt. 10:32-33).

6) Line 435 cites I John 4:8 to affirm that God is love but neglects to mention the context for how we know this truth 4:14—“the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.”

7) Lines 535-7 cites Hilary of Poitiers to support the idea of the inadequacy of our language for God (which is the grounds for “supplementing” Father, Son and Holy Spirit). This passage totally fails to see Hilary’s overriding concern that this very inadequacy of our language drives us to use those names which God has revealed as precise and primary. I will quote extensively from Hilary below.

8) Line 799 cites Mt. 28:19 and suggests we use this language “to demonstrate our ecumenical commitment” rather than our *obedience to Christ’s command* which is the thrust of the passage. Moreover we are told that we are free in baptism “to supplement this language” (line 801) but no source in Scripture is given to support this. In summary, at least twenty-two inadequate uses of source material is beyond unacceptable in a paper six years in the making and intended for use by the whole denomination. In fact, these changes cannot be mere accident. A definite bias exists.

2) Changes Between Drafts of *TGOL*

TGOL was released in a series of drafts. We may consider the import of changes made from February 2004 through May 2004 and September 2005 until the final report released publicly in April 2006. First, since the early drafts “Triune” and “Trinity” now join “scripture” in beginning with lower case rather than capital letters, though our confessions capitalize all three of them. Is

there meaning in such grammatical “demotion”? A few changes through the drafts actually move toward acknowledgement of the Father-Son relationship. Many more, however, move *TGOL* away from the historic expression.

A. Changes *toward* acknowledging Father and Son:

- 1) Line 220 now reads “together with God the Father” replacing the “Father Almighty” that was in quotation marks.
- 2) Lines 339-40 inserted “as Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” adding those names to the phrase “the one triune God known to us from scripture and creed.”
- 3) Line 1184 now makes reference to “access to the Father” when referring to Ephesians 2:18.

B. Changes *away* from expressing the Father-Son relationship

- 1) Line 449. The phrase from the Feb 04 draft “When Father, Son and Holy Spirit freely give themselves to each other there is no withholding of life and love” has been modified to “The love of the Triune God is full and free” by Sept 05 and then to “God is love” in the final version.
- 2) Lines 497-8 in the Mission section. Feb 04 read, “The Father sends the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit.” That excellent, clear and pithy phrasing was changed in May 04 to “God has sent Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.” Then, by the final version it has become, “God has sent Jesus Christ to accomplish our reconciliation with God and sends the Holy Spirit....”
- 3) Line 639. The references in Feb 04 to the ancient hymns known as the *Gloria* and the *Te Deum*, both strong on acknowledging the Father and Son, have been removed by Sept 05.
- 4) Line 992, Eucharist Section. Feb 04’s “giving thanks for the work of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit” has since been removed.
- 5) Line 1094, Embodying God’s Love Section. Two quotations from John have been removed since Feb 04: John 14:26, “whom the Father will send in my name” and John 20:21 “As the Father has sent me, so....”
- 6) Line 1225, Welcoming Love section. Feb 04’s “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are ever open to each other” has been removed.
- 7) Line 1482, Sharing Love section. Feb 04’s “Within the Koinonia of the Trinity, communion enhances the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” has been removed.

- 8) Line 1552, Celebrating Love section. For the second time this sentence from Feb 04 has been removed, “The Father sends the Son in the power of the Spirit.”
- 9) Line 1609, Love’s Blessing section. Feb 04’s “The blessing of Father, Son and Holy Spirit overflows and bathes us” has been removed.

Now the last mention of “Father” is in line 1228, nearly 350 lines from the end. The last quarter of the paper on the Trinity never mentions the Father, a rather long stretch from our supposed anchor.

3) Theological Missteps

Failing to ask, “By What Name Does God Desire to Be Called?”

TGOL acknowledges “God’s own self-disclosure in Jesus Christ” (line 235) and “the witness of scripture” (line 159) as determinative of how we know or say anything about God. Yet when it comes to “Naming the Triune God” (lines 308-381), *TGOL* speaks mainly of this as an activity in which we engage. The paper fails to ask the obvious, “Does God name himself for us? If so, what name does he give us? And, once the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us, how does Jesus himself teach us to name God?” These questions are not without answers. But the answers from Scripture would not lead *TGOL* where it wants to go.

In Exodus 3, God directs Moses to bring news to the Hebrews that he has heard their cries and will soon enact their deliverance. Moses asks God how to reply should the people ask concerning this God, “What is his name?” God replies, “I AM WHO I AM. Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:14). Further on, God adds “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations” (Exodus 3:15). God names himself YHWH, or I AM WHO I AM, rendered in English by the all small caps word, LORD. This name distinguishes our God from all others. The words “God” and “Lord” have come to be so generic in English usage that we might easily confuse our God with any other God, as if all religions have the same God. The particular LORD, however, is the means by which our God specifies his particularity and communicates how he stands in relationship to his people Israel. That the LORD I AM is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob means he has bound himself to a particular people through particular acts of covenant making, of saving, and community forming. We celebrate a God who makes himself known, on his terms, yet in our midst.

A theological reflection on what names we will use for God certainly needs to include, if not begin with, this foundational revelation that our God makes his name known to us as YHWH. This would help *TGOL* later in navigating how metaphors of impersonal objects are used

in worship. The authors might then have seen the constant tie in Scripture between such metaphors and the proper, personal name of the LORD. We would all have benefited from a sustained examination of the relationship between I AM and Father, Son and Holy Spirit as revealed names. Alas, none was forthcoming.

Moreover, *TGOL* never explores the way in which Jesus himself answered the request, “Lord, teach us to pray...” (Luke 11:1). If Jesus is the self-disclosure of the Triune God, what he says about addressing God would properly be considered of first importance in all our liturgies. *TGOL* does nothing with the Lord’s Prayer in which we are commanded, “When you pray, say Father...” (Luke 11:2). Nor is mention made of the magnificent gift the resurrected Christ gave us when he said, “...go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (John 20:17). Jesus ushers into the communion which he has ever enjoyed with his Father, a gift beyond compare, established in his victorious resurrection and ascension. I long to know more about what this message given to Mary means for prayer and worship.

To be working in the Christian tradition on the topic of naming God and yet fail to explore the crucial scriptural texts, in which both God names himself and our Lord teaches us how to pray, is a colossal theological misstep. It cannot but lead us in a direction away from the glorious heart of scriptural revelation. Then, no matter how many “rich and varied” words we pile up, we yet remain in the shallows.

Making Abstraction the Reality

The purpose of theology is to reflect rationally upon the way God has revealed himself to us. Abstract phrases are used to protect and to illumine the concrete words and events of revelation. For example, *homoousios* (of the same being) does not appear in Scripture, yet this Greek word is of immeasurable help in our thinking about how Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully God. *Trinity* is not a Scriptural term but expresses the truth enshrined in Scripture that the Father is God, the Son is God and the Spirit is God, one God yet distinct in three persons. We need theological phrases, abstract reflection and logical, rational discourse on the meaning of God’s self-revelation.

Yet we must never confuse our theological language with the reality of God or even with the way in which the primary speech of Scripture best signifies the reality of God for human minds. To speak of the “first Person of the Trinity” is helpful theological discourse. But we are not thereby getting “behind” the Father to something truer than this way the Father has made himself known. There is nothing we can utter that takes us closer to the reality signified by the name Father than the name Father itself. Any other naming falls away. Athanasius helped us understand that there was a “time” (before time!) when God was not “Creator” but never a time when he was not *Father*. There was a time when God was not “Savior” but

never a time when he was not *Son*. There was a time when God was not “Sanctifier” but never a time when God was not the Holy Spirit. God is eternally Father, Son (or Word), and Holy Spirit. In time the Word became flesh, the Son became Jesus Christ our Lord as he took up our humanity into the Triune life. And so the Son is ever wedded now to the name Jesus. These are the names given to us which shoot backwards into eternity and take us most truly, most closely into the presence of God who surely exceeds all our words and finite comprehension. Encompassing all of these is the majestic *I AM, YHWH*, revealed in Exodus 3 to be the name of our God forever. What if we were asked “Who then is your God?” Perhaps we might reply, “Our God is I AM, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God I AM.”

The misstep in *TGOL* is to reduce all language to metaphor and to lift up our human role in determining how we will speak faithfully of our God. This is, of course, inevitable when the first misstep of failing to deal with the way God names himself has already been made. So we are led to the tables-turning statement that “we should not insist on the exclusive use of the traditional trinitarian names, lest we quench the Spirit and even foster idolatry” (lines 360-1). Such an assertion rests on setting up two specious alternatives in lines 330—332, either *never* using Father, Son and Holy Spirit or “*only* confessing God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Once again, this is a straw man—I’ve never read of anyone who wanted to insist on never saying *anything* other than Father, Son and Spirit. But that would be very different from holding up those divinely given names as primary speech, speech beyond our choosing and more than metaphor or analogy. In fact, these lines about idolatry in *TGOL* evoke for me a kind of “chilling” effect on Christian passion to praise the Father. If that is the case, what kind of theological error is it to imply that placing Father and Son as primary is quenching the Spirit whom we know from Scripture is the one who graciously places the name “Abba, Father” in our hearts and on our lips (Rom. 8:17, Gal. 4:8). How ironic it is to imply that orthodoxy may be promoting idolatry even as *TGOL* will tumble into liturgical forms considering God in terms as impersonal as Table, Food and Host!

Lines 284-301 discuss “two analogies” for the Trinity and put them on a historical par with one another in the “church’s thinking.” There is an immediate historical error to note. The “psychological analogy,” considering the Trinity in terms of the human mind, is not in Scripture and is attributed (in its famous form) to Augustine in the fourth century. The analogy has merit, but can in no way be placed on the same plane with the understanding of the Trinity as a loving communion. That God has his being in relationship is derived from the Father-Son communion witnessed to throughout the gospels and especially explored, as we noted above, in John 14-17. Jesus discusses the Father and Son making their home in the lives of those who love him (Jn. 14:23, cf. Rev. 3:20). John speaks later of the fellowship (*koinonia*, communion) which believers enter that exists between the Father, the Son and them (I John 1:3). The communion of the Three

belongs to primary speech from our God. It is on a far different level than the “mind” analogy proposed later by the church fathers. Yet such a historical mistake made by *TGOL* more easily occurs when all ways of speaking are viewed as analogical.

A De-Personalizing of our God

The last misstep to mention follows from the other two. Trying to avoid using a personal pronoun and steering away from active engagement of the Father-Son-Spirit reality, *TGOL* was forced to write and reason in a manner the effect of which is to de-personalize the Triune God. The overriding metaphor of the paper is the abstract “love overflowing” rather than the names of persons. This plays out clearly in lines 199-205. I believe the paper actually wants to speak about God himself, and much of the praise is truly moving. But stepping back from the Father, Son and Spirit to speak of the love of the Triune God leads to a resounding “neutering” in the language. Nine times “it” begins a sentence, so that all that follows seems to be about the abstract quality of God’s love and not about God himself.

Later on, in the liturgical section, we can see how this plays out further. Line 400 declares the Triune God to be “our Rainbow of Promise, our Ark of Salvation, and our Dove of Peace.” In actuality, God directed Noah to make an ark (Gen.6:14) but was not himself an ark. Historically, the ark has been a symbol of the church, not God. Moreover, God gave the rainbow in the sky as a sign of his covenant faithfulness. He did not equate himself with the rainbow, as if the LORD were a kind of sun god or storm god (Gen. 9:12-17). The Dove of Peace works better because the Spirit did indeed come in the form of a Dove (Lk. 3:22). So it’s not that these images are starkly wrong, but that their effect is depersonalizing, especially as there is little or no counter-balancing use of the revealed names.

By contrast, the Psalms employ object-language in praise of God, but the scriptural use has a different feeling than the liturgy in *TGOL*. The reason is that the Psalms always stay in dynamic relationship to the particular God, the LORD, who has made himself known and acted savingly in both national and personal history. For example, Psalm 27 uses “light” and “stronghold,” two concrete, impersonal objects in praise of God. But the psalm does so with a constant connection to YHWH, the personal, particular God. The LORD is my light. The LORD is my stronghold. The referent there encompasses centuries of personal interaction between the God who names himself and his people. There is no danger of being left out of the personal relationship through the use of objects.

TGOL, sadly, because of its neglect of the Father-Son relationship and its abstracting of all language, even names, cannot help but give us liturgical forms that create a sense of depersonalization in our relationship with the Triune God of grace.

Conclusion

For all the above reasons, *TGOL* needs to be rejected by the General Assembly. Yes, there is much that is good in it. Its authors know their theology and their history. But precisely because they do, the lacuna in the paper are all the more inexcusable. The errors of *TGOL* are woven deeply within its good sections, and it requires considerable time and effort to ferret them out. For this reason, I do not believe the paper can be salvaged. We simply need to do better, and to stand firmly on the foundation of the Father-Son relationship at the heart of the New Testament revelation.

Earlier on, I noted how *TGOL* cited Hilary of Poitiers without articulating the import of Hilary's thought. Let us give Hilary the final word:

The Lord said that the nations were to be baptized *in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost*. The words of the faith are clear; the heretics do their utmost to involve the meaning in doubt. We may not on this account add to the appointed form, yet we must set a limit to their license of interpretation. Since their malice, inspired by the devil's cunning, empties the doctrine of its meaning while it retains the Names which convey the truth, **we must emphasize the truth which those Names convey. We must proclaim, exactly as we shall find them in the words of Scripture, the majesty and functions of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and so debar the heretics from robbing these Names of their connotation of Divine character, and compel them by means of these very Names to confine their use of terms to their proper meaning.** I cannot conceive what manner of mind our opponents have, who pervert the truth, darken the light, divide the indivisible, rend the scatheless, dissolve the perfect unity. It may seem to them a light thing to tear up Perfection, to make laws for Omnipotence, to limit Infinity; as for me, the task of answering them fills me with anxiety; my brain whirls, my intellect is stunned, my very words must be a confession, not that I am weak of utterance, but that I am dumb. Yet a wish to undertake the task forces itself upon me; it means withstanding the proud, guiding the wanderer, warning the ignorant. But the subject is inexhaustible; **I can see no limit to my venture of speaking concerning God in terms more precise than He Himself has used. He has assigned the Names—Father, Son and Holy Ghost,—which are our information of the Divine nature.** Words cannot express or feeling embrace or reason apprehend the results of enquiry carried further; all is ineffable, unattainable, incomprehensible. Language is exhausted by the magnitude of the theme, the splendour of its effulgence blinds the gazing eye, the intellect cannot compass its boundless extent. Still, under the necessity that is laid upon us, with a prayer for pardon to Him Whose attributes these are, we will

venture, enquire and speak; and moreover—it is the only promise that in so grave a matter we dare to make—we will accept whatever conclusion He shall indicate. (Hilary *De Trinitate* Bk 2. 5)

Yet He has, as we said, in 'Father' a name to indicate His nature; He is a Father unconditioned. He does not, as men do, receive the power of paternity from an external source. He is unbegotten, everlasting, inherently eternal. To the Son only is He known, for no one knoweth the Father save the Son and him to whom the Son willeth to reveal Him, nor yet the Son save the Father. Each has perfect and complete knowledge of the Other. Therefore, since *no one knoweth the Father save the Son*, let our thoughts of the Father be at one with the thoughts of the Son, the only faithful Witness, Who reveals Him to us. (Hilary *De Trinitate*, Bk. 2: 6)

We cannot find terms more precise than the names God has revealed for us to use! Therein lies the power, the majesty, the energy, and the entry into the presence of the Triune God in worship and work.

¹Emphasis here and in all quoted material in this section has been offered to highlight changes made by *TGOL* and is not in the original sources.

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“The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing” A Critique

by Viola Larson

Adapted, “*The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing: A Critique*,” from Voices of Orthodox Women website, www.vow.org, with permission.

*For Calvin...Jesus Christ holds a central position. There is not an “essence” of God’s love that one could know as such, and then a “manifestation” of such a love whose eminent representation is Jesus Christ. No distinction is made between the principle and the person, between the message and the messenger. **Jesus Christ is what he brings forth.** He is the mercy of God, he is the love of God, he is the open heart of God. Karl Barth*

“The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing,” is the paper called for by the 212th General Assembly (2000). The paper produced by the Office of Theology and Worship was compiled and written by at least ten authors. The Office of Theology and Worship requested responses to the paper from members of the church before the final draft is voted on during the 217th General Assembly in 2006. After reading this paper numerous times and affirming many of the truths highlighted in the paper, I still have serious reservations about the overall content. I find that the paper begins with some subtle movements that prevent its authors from keeping the biblical and confessional view of the Trinity intact. In fact I believe the authors of the paper move away from their subject and instead examine inclusive language for God. I will explore the two areas that I believe tend to undermine the classical view of the Trinity. The first area involves the name and theme of the paper, that is, God’s love overflowing. The second problem, and undoubtedly the most important, is a failure to view the Trinity from a Christological perspective. As stated these are subtle movements; they are missteps enmeshed within the authors’ statements of strong biblical truths, but problematic enough to cause the reader to be wary. Additionally, the problems are leaning on each other, or one might say they are propping each other up, so that when untwisting one the other must also be addressed. However, I will attempt to look at each problem consecutively.

The authors begin by suggesting that the term “love overflowing” is meant as a metaphor, “that speaks of the infinite ways the triune God loves all creation” (lines 77-78). They further state that the metaphor is their “attempt to express the amazing riches that flow boundlessly from the triune God who in loving freedom seeks and saves us,

reconciles and renews us, and draws us into loving relationships that reflect the eternal oneness of God” (lines 80-82). By the second page the use of the metaphor changes to become a metaphor for the ontological nature of God, that is, God as he is in himself. The authors assert that, “the task force was mindful of the struggle to find faithful ways to speak of the God *who is love overflowing...*” (95-96, Italics mine). They continue to refer to God as love overflowing both in terms of his being and in terms of his gifts, actions and attributes. The authors claim, “It is the mystery of the truth that God is holy, abundant, *overflowing love* both in relationship to us and in all eternity” (lines 247-248, italics mine). While this speaks of the being of God, the statement, “Abundant, *overflowing love* is the glory, majesty, and beauty of the triune God” (lines 433f, italics mine) describes the attributes of God. Three distinct difficulties arise with this naming of God. First, the authors have failed to alert the reader to the fact that they have offered a new metaphor for naming God, creating confusion in the text. Second the authors suggest that the paper addresses no controversy in the Church today, but rather they are helping the “church renew its faith in the triune God”(lines 69-71, 91). Yet a great controversy has arisen in the church over the use of inclusive language for God to the point that some prefer not to speak of the Triune God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Some breathlessly await the right to refer to God as Father/Mother or even on the extreme side, God/dess. Some have already addressed God as Grandmother.¹ And in fact, a great deal of this paper does address issues of inclusive language. This extra metaphor is not helpful within the context of the inclusive language controversy. Third, the image of God as overflowing love in his inner being is problematic since, within this paper, it often lays a fourth entity alongside the distinctions, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; an entity, which at various places tends to replace the work of Jesus Christ.

God is love (1 John 4:8). That means that ontologically, what God is, in himself, is love. Overflowing love is something different; the overflow is something extra, not the actual thing itself. On the other hand, it is from God’s very being, his Triune being that God loves the world, there is no need for overflow; God’s love is made known in the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. That love is complete from all eternity in the inner life of God. The believer experiences God’s love, not by overflow, but in

union with Jesus Christ. The Christian then offers, through the power of the Holy Spirit, God's love to a broken world. While the authors of "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing," undoubtedly did not intend the metaphor to do so, when one thinks of God as overflowing love one tends to think of Jesus as merely an instrument through which the overflow of God's love comes. Still, this is in spite of the fact that the authors clearly and rightly point out, in another section of the paper, that neither Jesus Christ nor the Holy Spirit are "secondary deities or mere creatures of a supposedly solitary supreme God" (lines 215f). Yet, the authors push the metaphor of love overflowing toward an extra thing alongside Jesus Christ when they equate the biblical analogies of God's provision for life to their term *overflowing love*. They cite Jer. 2:13 and Jn. 4:14. The images found in those texts picture God as a gushing fountain.

Jeremiah 2:13, images God as a fountain of living water. This is a picture of God as the life-giver. He tells his people Israel that they have forsaken him, "The fountain of living waters," and dug their own cisterns which are cracked and will not hold water. R. K. Harrison explains that "God is here described as a *fountain of living waters*, i.e., a spring or rivulet which would flow into a cistern for storage."² For those who have never lived on a farm nor watched their father look for springs in order to dig a well, they might not understand that this is not speaking of an overflow like a glass that has too much liquid in it and so it overflows and spills out. Rather when a container is provided, the fountain or spring bubbles up within the well or cistern. (Notice that biblically God provides the cistern and in the New Testament that is his inexpressible grace understood in the person of Jesus Christ.) In fact, this is the way Jesus refers to the life he gives when speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well. "But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14). This is a personal picture; God's gift is mediated through a personal God. Jesus Christ reveals himself as the gift of God. Those in Christ possess the well of water that bubbles up to eternal life; those without Christ are without such life.

When worked out in practical terms the use of the metaphor, overflowing love, leads to speculative theology. For instance, the authors write of the early Christians' understanding of the life and actions of Christ and how that worked out in their own experience, "they came to see that the unparalleled depths of communion that they experienced every day in their shared life with one another were actually the overflow of God's own love. This overflowing love existed eternally in God as the mutual participation, self-giving, vulnerability, interdependence, and responsibility shared among the divine persons" (lines 1391-94). After listing what attributes this overflowing love in God's inner being consists of, dubious assertions at best, and how that works out in the communal life of the church, the authors provide the reader with their view of a progressive revelation of the outreach of God's overflow of love. They write:

The overflow of God's trinitarian love does not stop with the Christian community. The pattern of *koinonia* in the early church was one of ever-expanding circles of sharing, ever-broadening boundaries of participation, giving, vulnerability, interdependence, and responsibility for one another, all humankind, and ultimately the whole creation. As the Triune God's extravagant love continues to overflow in the church today, we receive power to share the abundant love of God in the world, in word and deed. Thus the Lord adds to our numbers daily, as we grow in grace and embody God's love in tangible deeds of self-giving before a world desperately in need of the Good News. (lines 1423-1429)

In this picture of overflowing love, love seems to have the quality of something that keeps flowing outward apparently going beyond the Christian community "broadening" the boundaries and "expanding" the circles. (And here overflowing love has certainly taken the place of "Christ in you the hope of glory" (Col 1:27b)). Within this text, the metaphor, overflowing love, loses its ability to hold on to any boundary. Looking through the lens of a Christological perspective, this particular paragraph would be biblical, Jesus Christ being the boundary. Then the above statement could be understood as a picture of the church as the community which held to the Lordship of Christ and who, because of his Lordship, began to include Gentiles within the circle. The early circle of Christians, because of Jesus Christ, began to touch the lives of unbelievers in helpful ways such as doing away with class structures, caring for the poor and saving abandoned babies. But, interpreting the above paragraph without the boundary of Jesus Christ could mean that all, even those outside of Christ, were included in the church. The problem is that the metaphor "overflowing love" begins, in this paper, to eat up the work of Jesus Christ. The distinctiveness of Christianity could be lost.

It is not God's overflowing love within the community of believers alongside of Jesus Christ that affects the world. It is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. It is also the believer hid in Jesus Christ, experiencing the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who reaches out to those in the world. While we may not know every attribute within the inner life of the Trinity, we know Jesus Christ through the Scriptures. When Thomas asked Jesus to show him and the other disciples the Father, Jesus replied, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know me, Phillip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father?'" (John 14:9). Jesus Christ is the revelation of who God is. The vulnerability of God is seen in Scripture in the actions of Jesus touching lepers, eating with those society considered exceptional sinners and dying on the cross. God's holiness and transforming power are seen as Jesus walks in holiness, forgives sins and tells those he encounters to, "Go and sin no more." Of course all of this includes love, the love of the Father who is in agreement with the Son and the Holy Spirit regarding the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross. But we are unable to know anything about the Trinity without Jesus

Christ as promised and imaged in the Old Testament and made known in the New Testament.

Therefore, a paper on the Trinity cannot rightly address its subject without first addressing Christology. It cannot rightly uphold the Scripture and the church's confessions without coming at it through the Son of the Father. To be sure, in some sense the authors of the paper concur, explaining that we can only reliably know the love of God "through God's own self-gift in the person and work of Jesus Christ and in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit" (lines 171-72). They also state, "We are invited to participate in this mystery that has been opened to us by God's own self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and in the coming of the Holy Spirit who binds us to Christ" (lines 234-236). But having stated those truths they continue using overflowing love as the mediating focus for our knowledge of God. The authors of "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing" have so over emphasized overflowing love, that rather than focus on the persons of the Trinity, they have focused on the reciprocal action within the Triune God. Having focused on the mutual actions of relationships within the Godhead as the basis for knowing God, they miss the center, Jesus Christ. The biblical text makes it clear that Jesus is center. It is the Holy Spirit who places us in Christ but who also reveals to us the words of Jesus Christ. On the mount of transfiguration it is the Father who says, "This is my Son, my chosen One; listen to him!" (Luke 9:35b). Jesus states, "the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things, and *bring to your remembrance all that I said to you*" (John 14:26, emphasis mine). Biblical teaching about God centers in Jesus Christ who is the one through whom God has spoken the final word (Heb 1:2), who is the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), and who is the only one able to explain God. "No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him" (John 1:18). Knowledge of the Triune God must be placed squarely on the biblical understanding of the person of Jesus Christ.

In a second instance, failure to start from Christology and, instead, attempt to promote a new metaphor, leads to further theological speculation. A good deal of speculative theology is used when the authors address the issues of language about the Trinity. The authors clearly state that Scripture, the confessions and creeds, as well as the Presbyterian Church (USA) "speak of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (lines 326-27). But the paper begins to shift from biblical foundations to speculative theology when the authors refer to Father, Son and Holy Spirit as "an indispensable anchor for our efforts to speak faithfully of God" (line 333). Metaphors and analogies can be weak and if carried too far wreak disorder with doctrine. The authors use the analogy of an anchor to understand the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit as something that keeps the Church from drifting away from her safe position, "stability," and something that gives the Church liberation to work with new language. They write that because of this anchor, "we are liberated to interpret, amplify, expand upon the ways of naming the Triune God familiar to most

church members" (lines 336-37). But the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit were never meant to be a safety net, (or anchor); they rather explain the being of God.

Using Father, Son and Holy Spirit as anchors for freedom of expression, the authors offer an apologetic for using differing metaphors to picture the Triune God. The first apologetic is that the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit have been misunderstood and so create all kinds of problems, such as, sanctioning hierarchies and causing people to think of God as male (lines 346-351). Another apologetic is that to insist on the exclusive use of Father Son and Holy Spirit would "quench the Spirit and even foster idolatry" (lines 360f). They reason that calling God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit exclusively, "would diminish the joy of knowing God ever more fully" (line 363). The authors suggest that female imagery for God "has yet to be adequately explored," and then give various biblical references for female imagery for God. Next they move to Calvin referring to his commentary on Isaiah. They quote his statement "that no figures of speech can describe God's extraordinary affection towards us; for it is infinite and various." Referring to Calvin they also write:

He [Calvin] further explains that God "has manifested himself to be both. . . Father and Mother" so that we might be more aware of God's constant presence and willingness to assist us (*Commentary on Isaiah* 46:3). God "did not satisfy himself with proposing the example of a father," writes Calvin, "but in order to express his very strong affection, he chose to liken himself to a mother, and call [the people of Israel] not merely 'children,' but the *fruit of the womb*, towards which there is usually a warmer affection" (*Commentary on Isaiah* 49:15). (lines 371-376, their italics)

The authors' use of these quotations from Calvin is a good example of why and how this paper moves away from its subject, the Trinity. The authors having focused on overflowing love as a name for God have written a paper about the substitution of other names for the Trinitarian name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Explaining Father, Son and Holy Spirit as an anchor meant to liberate the believer's imagination and language for God, they begin to equate metaphors, similes, God's attributes and analogies with the names, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They turn to Calvin for agreement. But Calvin was speaking of how God makes his love known to those who belong to him; that is, how are Israel and the Church to understand God's love in relation to them. He was not speaking of names for God, but rather was speaking of the love of God. Calvin was also using and commenting on scriptural analogy, not on names for the Triune God. In fact, adding more from Calvin's text one sees the use of analogy and the emphasis on God's love. He writes:

But as God did not only begin to act as the father and nurse of his people from the time when they were born, but also "begat them" (James 1:8) spiritually, I do not object to extending the words so far as to mean, that they were brought, as it were, out of the bowels of God into a new life and the hope of an eternal inheritance.

If it be objected, that God is everywhere called “a Father,” (Jeremiah 31:9; Malachi 1:6,) and that this title is more appropriate to him, I reply, that no figures of speech can describe God’s extraordinary affection towards us; for it is infinite and various; so that, if all that can be said or imagined about love were brought together into one, yet it would be surpassed by the greatness of the love of God. By no metaphor, therefore, can his incomparable goodness be described. (*Commentary on Isaiah 46:3*)

Likewise, in chapter 49 of Calvin’s commentary on Isaiah, not only does Calvin point out that God uses the image of a mother to show his “strong anxiety” for Israel, but he goes on to point out that although mothers become “such monsters” as to forget their children, still, “The affection which he bears toward us is far stronger and warmer than the love of all mothers.” Calvin was not describing the distinctions in the Godhead, but rather, describing God’s care for his people. Within the context of a paper about the Trinity, the comments of Calvin used by the authors are not helpful. Rather they might have noted Calvin’s comments from his Catechism about the Father:

Why do you call him Father—Primarily with regard to Christ, who is his eternal wisdom, begotten of him before all time, and who, being sent into the world, was declared his Son. From this, however, we infer that since God is the Father of Jesus Christ, he is also our Father.³

The Christian Church, the Church Fathers and Mothers, the Scriptures and confessions provide ample language for speaking of God in many ways. Such words as light, rock and mother are wonderful metaphors and/or similes. Such pictures as the woman searching for the lost coin and the father running to meet a wayward son are beautiful analogies. But to address the Trinitarian God, the Christian must come through the Son of the Father who is revealed by the Holy Spirit. To even suggest, as the

authors of the paper do, that exclusive use of the “traditional trinitarian names” would “quench the Spirit” and “foster idolatry,” as well as “diminish the joy of knowing God ever more fully,” is at best nonsense. Only in Jesus Christ can we know God fully, only in him can we experience the fullest joy (John 15:9-11). The Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ, gives us language to speak about, the Triune God.

¹ See the Women’s Celebration of Fifty years of Women in Ministry Service at Princeton, the opening worship service.

² R.K. Harrison, *Jeremiah & Lamentation: An Introduction Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, D.J. Wiseman, General Editor, (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press 1973) 57.

³ John Calvin, *Catechism of the Church of Geneva of 1545*, in the Faith of the Church: A Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed According to Calvin’s Catechism, Karl Barth, Editor, Jean-Louis Leuba, Trans, Gabriel Vahanian, fourth printing, (Cleveland: Meridian Books, The World Publishing Company 1963) 4.

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