



Community of Christ

CHRIST'S MISSION, OUR MISSION

World Conference Resolution (WCR) 1304 Baptismal Prayers

Introduction

The 2013 World Conference approved this resolution:

WCR 1304 Baptismal Prayers

Whereas, The First Presidency has been involved in discussion for some time about the church's prescribed baptismal statement; and

Whereas, There are significant scriptural, theological, sacramental, and translations issues to be carefully reviewed when considering any alternatives to the baptismal prayer prescribed in Doctrine and Covenants 17:21C; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the World Conference requests the First Presidency, as leading teacher and interpreter of scripture and church law, to develop an optional, alternative baptismal statement that is sensitive to inclusive language and translation concerns while maintaining scriptural, theological, and sacramental integrity throughout the church; and be it further

Resolved, That WCR 48 be rescinded.

The First Presidency asked various groups to study the scriptural, theological, sacramental, pastoral, ethical, and translations issues concerned. Groups involved were the Theology Formation Team, Ecumenical and Interfaith Ministries Team, World Church Leadership Council, the Council of Presidents of Seventy, and the Translations Team. The Presidency also reviewed all comments from members about this question.

Summary of Reports

While it is not possible to present all the content of the reports and discussions, the Presidency thinks it is important to summarize:

1. Christians have few things in common, but the baptismal statement in Matthew 28:19 is one of them. This statement has been in constant use since the end of the first century CE. It unites us as Christians across time and space.
2. The name "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" contains the whole gospel story in condensed form. Community of Christ upholds the doctrine of the Trinity as

part of its understanding of the mystery of God. Our Basic Beliefs state: “We affirm the Trinity—God who is a community of three persons.” This belief is expressed by using the classical Trinitarian name of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Belief in God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has deep roots in the Bible, especially in the story of Jesus. In the Gospels, Jesus is the beloved Son, whose unique, intimate relationship with “*Abba*” (Aramaic for Father) reveals the nature of God. Jesus, the beloved Son, was crucified and raised. He sends the Spirit of God to his disciples, drawing them into this relationship of love for the sake of mission to the world. In this story God is revealed as infinite Source of all things; as the incarnate Son, Jesus of Nazareth; and as the life-transforming power of the Spirit. Baptism brings persons into this story, uniting them with God, whose love is revealed in the eternal relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit.

3. In the doctrine of the Trinity the Father does not stand above the Son or Spirit. The three persons share in a mutual relationship of oneness. The term *persons* does not mean autonomous beings or individuals. It is the translation of the Greek term, *hypostasis*, and the Latin term, *persona*. It refers to God’s three distinct ways of being God.
4. Some misunderstand the term *Father* in a male authority-figure way. When this happens, belief in God as Father has been used to justify many forms of male dominance (patriarchy) and abuse. To avoid such misuse, some Christians have sought substitutes for Father. One alternative has been “God, Christ, Holy Spirit.” This phrase is found in scripture (2 Corinthians 13:13 NRSV), but it does not serve this purpose well. It hides the uniqueness of the first person of the Trinity and the full divinity of the Son and the Spirit.
5. The name “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” identifies the persons of the Trinity in a way that avoids the weakness of other phrases. Some believe that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are just three aspects of one God as viewed by the believer, rather than three coeternal, coequal, distinct persons within the Godhead. Because it does not see the persons of the Godhead as having distinct reality, such belief is unable to express that God is an eternal community of love.
6. Some have suggested replacing Father, Son, and Spirit with Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier or other similar phrases. This statement replaces the persons with functions. It ignores that in scripture Father, Son, and Spirit together create, redeem, and sustain.
7. As we claim our “unique and sacred place within the circle of those who call upon the name of Jesus Christ” (Doctrine and Covenants 161:1b), we cannot disregard the consensus among many Christian churches that the traditional Trinitarian statement, which names God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the most fitting language for baptism.

8. The church has had a formal policy on inclusive language for many years. The policy does not recommend deleting words used to describe God. It recommends adding to our vocabulary. Scripture and tradition give us a rich variety of words and metaphors for God. The church is called to increase its knowledge and use of these words and metaphors, especially in public worship. Language opens us to new depths of the knowledge of God.
9. The church hears the prophetic call to honor the Worth of All Persons. This requires us to listen to painful stories and make room for people to experience healing. Broadening our use of inclusive language is an act of hospitality, pastoral sensitivity, and community-building that communicates mutuality among people and openness to growing understanding of God's nature.
10. Provision of optional, alternative Communion prayers sets some precedent for providing an optional, alternative baptism prayer statement as requested by the World Conference.
11. Doctrine and Covenants 162:2d states: "It is not the form of the sacrament that dispenses grace but it is the divine presence that gives life. Be respectful of tradition and sensitive to one another, but do not be unduly bound by interpretations and procedures that no longer fit the needs of a worldwide church. In such matters direction will come from those called to lead."
12. It is vital for the church to develop sensitivity to the symbolic character of language about God. God is infinite. God is mystery beyond comprehension. The Eternal "I Am" cannot be defined by or confined to any name in human language. Would God want a "name" we use for God to become a barrier that keeps someone from beginning a healthy covenant relationship with God? Instead, the church's mission is to help all come to know "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit" (2 Corinthians 13:13 NRSV).
13. In many nations approval of an optional, alternative baptismal statement will be experienced as another difficult change while the church is trying to adjust to past changes such as revised policies related to who is eligible to receive Communion, alternative Communion prayers, baptism and membership, and same-gender relationships and ordination, etc. This is a major pastoral concern.
14. A possible approach was considered for the apostle to grant an exception to use an alternative baptism prayer statement if a candidate objects to using the word "Father" as a term that has painful or negative meanings in his or her life. However, granting an exception requires an explanation to the congregation that could create additional trauma for the baptism candidate because of insensitive comments or intrusive questions others may raise. This is a significant pastoral issue.

15. Individual priesthood members are not authorized to change the prescribed wording of a sacrament according to personal theological preferences.

Conclusion

The question of an optional, alternative baptism prayer statement is very difficult to resolve without creating more issues that are just as difficult to resolve. After two years of discussion there is not sufficient agreement in the World Church Leadership Council about how to solve all of the theological, scriptural, sacramental, pastoral, and administrative issues.

Therefore, after extensive discussion and prayerful consideration, the Presidency has concluded that:

1. The current baptism prayer statement should be used in all instances without changes, except the following: the words *Holy Spirit* may be used instead of Holy Ghost. Therefore, the official baptism statement is: “(Name of person), having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost (or Holy Spirit). Amen.”
2. In harmony with the “Policy of Inclusive Language in the Life and Ministry of the Community of Christ,” (www.CofChrist.org/common/cms/resources/Documents/Inclusive-Language-Policy.pdf), the Presidency strongly recommends using inclusive and non-gender-specific language *in addition to* other words to refer to the *Divine* in baptism worship service elements such as hymns, readings, statements, visual images, etc. The Presidency has requested church staff members to prepare sample baptism services to guide worship planners in this regard.

The church is reminded that:

All church members are urged to examine the depth of your baptismal commitment. Having been baptized and confirmed, become fully immersed in the servant life of Christ.

Live the meaning of your baptism daily as you grow in the skills and qualities of discipleship. Actively and generously support the ministries of the church, which was divinely established to restore Christ’s covenant of peace, even the Zion of your hopes.

—Doctrine and Covenants 164:3a–b

May God bless all who seek to follow Jesus Christ as committed disciples.

Sincerely,

THE FIRST PRESIDENCY