

What's In A Name Anyway?

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"A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches"

—Proverbs 22:1

What connotations or associations come to mind in thinking about the following names?

- » George Washington
- » Mahatma Gandhi
- » Judas Iscariot
- » Thomas Jefferson
- » Lou Gehrig
- » Britney Spears
- » Yassir Arafat
- » Janet Reno
- » Cal Worthington
- » Richard Nixon
- » Jay Leno
- » Julius and Ethel Rosenberg
- » Frank Sinatra
- » Sirhan Sirhan
- » Eleanor Roosevelt
- » Adolf Hitler
- » Bono
- » Florence Nightingale
- » Gene Autry

- » Hillary Clinton
- » Fidel Castro
- » Martin Luther

Do most of these names ring a bell? Do we associate them with certain things? Do some of them evoke pleasant responses? Do some of them provoke unpleasant reactions?

Would any of us want to be the son or daughter, father or mother, uncle or aunt, nephew or niece or cousin of Al Capone, Charles Manson, or Jeffrey Dahmer? How would we feel if we were associates of Ken Lay, Osama bin Laden, or Michael Jackson? How about Billy Graham or Mother Theresa?

Some parents have been crass or unfeeling enough to give their children names that will make them the butt of jokes for the rest of their lives, like the farmer named Hogg who named his daughter Ima. I graduated in the same class with a person named Jesse James. A man in Minneapolis by the name of Legg named his two sons Harry and Seymour.

If such a name annoys a person enough, he has the legal privilege to change it—like the fellow with the name Joe Stinks who insisted on changing his name to Charlie Stinks. Then there is the addled boxer down in Georgia who changed his perfectly acceptable name to God's Own Fool!

Name = Reputation

Perhaps the most important scriptural significance of names is not so much in the label as it is in the reputation (whether of fame or infamy) of the holder of the label. God has often changed the label to fit more correctly the characteristics of the person, i.e. Jacob (Contender) to Israel (Prevailer), Abram (Father) to Abraham (Father of Nations), and Hillel (Light-Bringer) to Satan (Adversary). Even a name change by God cannot automatically alter the reputation of an individual.

On the subject of names, two verses in the Bible's wisdom literature immediately come to mind:

- » A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, loving favor rather than silver and gold. (Proverbs 22:1)
- » A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one's birth. (Ecclesiastes 7:1)

Why is the day of death better? At birth, a person is largely a blank slate—his reputation is nothing (apart from his connection with Mom and Dad), so his name is little more than a mere label. However, at his death he has built either a good reputation or a bad one.

Reputations are built action-by-action over a lifetime, and they can be given as a legacy to a person's offspring. To be known as a son of Abraham or Job would carry some inherent honor. To be known as the son of Joseph Stalin or Julius and Ethel Rosenberg might be attended with some grief. So a name can help or harm even later generations.

Which do you think Richard Milhous Nixon craved more at the final years of his life—more money, more political clout, or a good name and a good night's sleep? Not long ago, in the final few months

of the Clinton presidency, William Jefferson Clinton was feverishly trying to fashion his so-called legacy, trying to make up for a lengthy record of lying and other immoral behavior. What does he desire more now that his health has begun to deteriorate—to be known for bringing a peace to the Middle East, for saving Social Security and Medicare, for advocating welfare reform (none of which he actually accomplished), or to have a sterling reputation?

About thirty years ago, a minister whose wife's health had temporarily prevented her from traveling, asked me to go along with him to visit some prospective members in northern Wisconsin. He drove and I served as navigator, attempting to follow the map and the directions provided by the prospective member. As we crossed over a hill, we noticed on the immediate right a spacious dairy farm with a large barn and several huge, blue Harvestore silos. On the left side of the road was a run-down, ramshackle trailer with two abandoned cars in the driveway. The minister chuckled in his inimitable way and said, "Mr. Maas, how much do you want to bet that our prospective member is located on the left?" His prognostication proved correct. God has the proclivity of choosing the "weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty" (I Corinthians 1:27).

When our names are mentioned, what image of us comes up in the mind of the hearer?

- » neighborly,
- » generous,
- » honest,
- » faithful,
- » highly moral?

On the other hand, perhaps our names conjure up associations like:

- » odd,
- » stingy,
- » secretive,
- » sloppy,
- » unruly.

Obviously, God's people should be known for the former and not the latter (Galatians 5:16-26; I Peter 4:1-3).

A Good Word from a Good Name

The full impact of Proverbs 22:1 became forcefully impressed upon me as I assumed a new academic job a few years ago. That spring, largely at the insistence of my old mentor and former doctoral

advisor, Fred Tarpley, I applied for a job at Jarvis Christian College, a small, historically black college in East Texas. At the time, Dr. Tarpley was serving as Interim Dean of that institution until his retirement that summer.

Fred Tarpley was my doctoral advisor and mentor when I was a graduate student at East Texas State University (ETSU, now Texas A&M at Commerce) twenty-five years ago. He was one of my favorite teachers over the years, teaching me the principles of linguistics and the International Phonetic Alphabet, and providing a sterling model of diligence and rigorous scholarship. He has authored six books and numerous articles on dialectology, place names, and historical lore of East Texas. He made rigorous demands on his students, for which I have been grateful.

After serving for many years as Department Chairman of Language and Literature at ETSU, he then assumed a faculty position at Jarvis Christian College, where he worked hard to build the English curriculum, establish the Sigma Tau Delta English Society, write grants, and tirelessly serve the students. When the Dean unexpectedly resigned, he stepped into that role. His last official act before he retired was to accompany me to my interview with the President of the college.

No one at the new institution knew me from Adam; I was the new kid on the block. As I interviewed for the position, the division chair of Arts and Sciences asked me a few perfunctory questions, went over my résumé, and then forcefully said, "You've been recommended by Fred Tarpley. That's good enough for me."

Fred Tarpley had "put in a good word" for me with many of my new colleagues. Being recommended by Fred Tarpley seemed to remove the tension of ice-breaking or becoming acquainted. Knowing him provided a common ground, turning us from strangers into instantaneous friends. The good name—the reputation—of my old mentor made my assumption of new academic duties much easier. It also sobered me with the knowledge that there would be expectations to perform as Fred Tarpley had. His finely honed reputation made his shoes difficult to fill.

Bearing God's Name

All members of God's church have inherited a Family name far more valuable than any surname. We have an awesome responsibility to uphold and honor the nobility and dignity of the name of God. The reputation we create for our church, our businesses, or our institutions is the legacy we pass on to our brothers and sisters and our children.

Occasionally, we are saddened that people who have accepted our Family name have brought disgrace on all of us. A number of years ago, the Dean of Students at Ambassador College Pasadena had to cancel the long anticipated Snow-Line Party because the resort where it was previously held had barred all Ambassador students. Apparently, the year before the resort management had seen a number of students (proudly displaying Ambassador College sweatshirts) gleefully wrecking their furniture and equipment. Similarly, in 1975, the city of Longview, Texas, no longer welcomed Ambassador students after they had a pizza-throwing fight in a local establishment. Unfortunately, these students were also wearing Ambassador College shirts.

Ecclesiastes 10:1 says, "Dead flies putrefy the perfumers' ointment, and cause it to give off a foul odor; so does a little folly to one respected for wisdom and honor." It takes years for a reputation to be built up, but seemingly only a few minutes to destroy it. There are ample warnings in Scripture that if we appropriate God's Family name, and then by our behavior show our contempt for it, our

names will be blotted out of the Book of Life (Exodus 32:33). Proverbs 10:7 teaches, "The memory of the righteous is blessed, but the name of the wicked will rot." Conversely, "He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels" (Revelation 3:5).

God feels His name to be so important that He made one of His ten great laws to cover this subject: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain." The full intent of the third commandment goes far beyond cursing and using foul language. We have been invited by God to share His Family name (Matthew 28:19). If we appropriate His name and then live in a way to bring dishonor to it, we are worse than the infidels we sometimes ridicule.

One television preacher from a large Protestant denomination once asked, "If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" In this vein, we need to ponder the full intent of Paul's admonition to the Romans: "You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,' as it is written" (Romans 2:23-24; see Isaiah 52:5; Ezekiel 36:22).

If we were someone's only contact with God's way, if our behavior were in fact their Bible (not just our words but also our deeds), could he or she make it into God's Kingdom? If someone were to follow our example of righteousness, would he or she be acceptable to God? How are we doing in upholding God's Family name? His name, which is now our name, is worth far more than all the riches of the world.

What do people think—how do they react—when they see or hear our names?