

The Virtue of Name-Calling

John W. Robbins | Excerpted from *The Trinity Review*, Oct 1979, TrinityFoundation.org

American Christians of the twentieth century are, for the most part, a pusillanimous bunch. About the only time they shed their timidity is in order to attack a fellow Christian who is valiant in defense of the truth. A Christian like *that* is perceived as a threat to the "unity of believers" and the "peace of the church." Confronted with such a manifest threat to unity and peace, some professed Christians can be quite vindictive and vicious, as J. Gresham Machen learned earlier in this century and as Harold Lindsell is learning now.

Some time ago a reader wrote to the editors of *Present Truth* (now *Verdict*) magazine to protest the magazine's attitude toward Karl Barth. In his letter, the reader referred to Barth as a "monstrous miscreant," thereby violating the first commandment of polite society: Never call people names (unless, of course, those people are ignorant fundamentalists). The editor, in a stern and curt rebuke, reprimanded the reader, saying, "We suggest, sir, that you stick to judging Barth's theology and not his person." That is, never call people names. Name-calling is not only non-Christian, it is worse: It is *prima facie* evidence of bad taste, and whatever Christians do, they must never, no never, give the impression that they are of low birth.

Two of the most shocking things for a twentieth century American Christian to read are the works of Martin Luther and John Calvin, for these men— who were valiant for the truth—did not hesitate to call people names. Are Luther and Calvin wrong and the editors of *Present Truth* right? The only way for a Christian to discover the answer is to examine the Scriptures.

Unfortunately, most professed Christians today seem never to have gotten past *Matthew* 7. That's too bad, for they should proceed to read *Matthew* 23. In that chapter alone, Christ calls the scribes and Pharisees names 16 times. The names are "hypocrites" (7 times), "son of Hell" (once), "blind guides" (twice), "fools and blind" (3 times), "whited sepulchres" (once), "serpents" (once), and "offspring of vipers" (once). Since Christ was without sin, we may deduce by good and necessary consequence that name-calling as such is not a sin. Since everything Christ did was righteous and virtuous, we may deduce by good and necessary consequence that accurate name-calling is a virtue.

But Christ is not the only example. John, who some professed Christians love to quote because they misunderstand and misrepresent what he says about love, calls certain persons known to his readers "liars" and "antichrists." Those sensitive souls who flinch when they read chapter 25 of the *Westminster Confession* identifying the pope as antichrist should read *1 John 2* and *2 John*. John was not talking about someone far off in Rome; he was referring to persons known to his readers.

Then there is Paul, who in *1 Corinthians* corrected those at Corinth who denied the resurrection. In chapter 15, verse 36, he refers to one objector as a fool. And can we not conclude from *Psalms 14:1* and *53:1* that Madalyn O'Hair, for example, is a fool? Further, in *1 Timothy 4:2* Paul refers to "hypocritical liars" and in *5:13* he writes of "gossips and busybodies." Those who object to name-calling must object to the practice of Jesus, Paul, and John, among many others.

The obvious question, which the perceptive reader has already asked, is, what shall we do with *Matthew 5:22*: "Whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be liable to the Sanhedrin; but whoever shall say, Fool, shall be liable to the fire of Hell." Does not this verse, just as *Matthew 7:1* does with judging and *Matthew 5:34-37* do with swearing, prohibit all name-calling? The answer, equally obvious, is no. Such an interpretation would create irreconcilable contradictions in the Bible. Just as *Matthew 7:1* does not prohibit accurate judging and *Matthew 5:34-37* do not prohibit legitimate swearing, neither does *Matthew 5:22* prohibit accurate name-calling. It is not name-calling per se that is proscribed, but inaccurate name-calling. Jesus, John, and Paul used names accurately and achieved a specific purpose: telling the truth.

Name-calling, accurately done, is not only not a sin, it is a virtue. It is identifying a person for what he is, and this cannot be done except by doing it. Anyone who studies the examples quoted here or any of the many other examples in the Bible will find that the name is used in conjunction with stated reasons for using it. The reasons constitute an argument, and the name is a conclusion. Those who deny that Jesus came in the flesh are antichrists and liars. Those who deny the resurrection are fools, and so on. The reluctance to call names is a type of reluctance to draw valid conclusions from the evidence; it is an attempt to "curb logic," to use the neo-orthodox phrase. As such, it is but another example of the anti rationalism of our age.

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