

What's In A Name?

Luke 2:21

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.

Introduction

What's in a name? Do names mean anything anymore? Corporations used to be named for their founder, like "Ford Motor Company," "Bell Telephone," or "Phillips Electronics." Or they were named for what they made and where they were from, like, "American Steel," "General Electric," or "Kentucky Fried Chicken."

Nowadays companies tend to be given names that have nothing to do with what they make, where they're from, or who founded them. For example, knowing only the name of the company, could you guess what these companies make?

- AstroZeneca
- Calabash
- Volumetrics

and, I'm not kidding you, a company called

- Whatchamacallit

The newscaster on the Simpsons once made fun of this trend of choosing "nonsense names" when he announced that "3M and M&M have merged to form – get this – Ultradine Systems."

I. Names in the Bible

In the olden days, and I mean thousands of years ago, names always meant something. Consider the importance of names in the Old Testament:

a) Abraham

Abraham's original name was Abram, and his wife's original name was Sarai. Their names were changed by the Lord to reflect his promise that he would make them a great nation. "Abram" means "Father of Aram," while "Abraham" means "father of **many** people." "Sarai" means "my princess," but Sarah means only "princess," implying that she too will be a princess **of all**.

b) Hosea

The prophet Hosea made special use of names in his prophecies against Israel. He named his first daughter "Lo-Ruhamma," which means "No Mercy," because the Lord would no longer show mercy to Israel. He named his second son "Lo-Ammi," which means "Not My People," for the Lord would disown them because of their rebellion against His laws.

c) John and Jesus

And of course, as we heard during Advent, Elizabeth and Zachariah were not to call their son “Zach, Junior” but “John,” which means “God has mercy.” Mary, too, was to name her son not “Joseph, Jr.” but “Jesus” or in Hebrew Joshua, which means “The Lord saves.”

A name gave meaning to something. It wasn't just so you could tell someone or something apart from someone or something else. It actually told you something about that person, or at least what their parents expected from them. So when Jesus, eight days after his birth, was brought up to the nearby temple in Jerusalem to be circumcised, he was given a name that would mark him forever. He was given a name at which, according to Paul in Philippians, every knee would bow “in heaven and on earth.”

II. Names in our Day

Which brings us back to the kinds of names we give in our day and age, names like “AstroZeneca” or “Volumetrics.” We name our children after ourselves, or using names that sound good to us. When pastor and Deb mentioned to some relatives that they wanted to keep their daughter's Russian name or at least pick something close to it, they thought that was odd. Wouldn't they want to “pick” their “own” name? Other parents that pastor and Deb traveled with renamed their children with new, and often bizarre, names. Even though their Russian children already had perfectly “American” names like Julia or Alexander!

I wonder if Elizabeth and Zechariah, or Joseph and Mary, were upset that the Lord would name their child and not them. Maybe they already had a name picked out! Certainly Elizabeth and Zechariah knew they wouldn't have another child, and this was their one chance to keep a “family tradition” going by naming this special son. But they were obedient. They listened to the Lord, and did as he asked, rather than what they might have wanted. By obeying God, they showed their faith that he was indeed the God who “shows mercy,” and the Lord who would “save his people.” He was a Lord and God who had the right to command their unconditional obedience. He had that right because he had sent two special boys at a special time: one boy to prepare the way for the sacrifice of the other.

When the Christian church began, there was no need to “name” congregations. A congregation of Christians was simply called “the church at Rome,” or “the church at Corinth.” There was never a need for more than one church in the city until cities became so big that “parishes” apart from the main church were created. Then names had to be given to those “parishes” to distinguish one from the other. The Church – or “Diocese” – of Philadelphia, for example, now has “St. Madeline's,” “St. Rosa's,” “Our Lady of Peace,” etc. etc. Lutherans took over the same idea, and named their churches after saints or after names for God to distinguish one from the other. Churches were named “St. Mark's,” “St. John's,” “Our Savior,” or “Trinity.” But the name didn't say much about what made that congregation “different.”

Nowadays many new churches have gone the way of corporate America, giving themselves names like “Willow Creek,” “Stillwater,” “The Summit,” “or, pastor’s personal favorite, “Crosspointe.” But are those names any more “meaningful” than the old-fashioned ones? What would Jesus think, or his Father, who so carefully picked out his name before he was even born?

God could have chosen to call his son “The Lord, Junior,” or “Bob” or even given him a great title like “Supreme Worshipful Master.” He didn’t. He chose to call him Joshua – Jesus – “The Lord Saves.” And in so doing he communicated a wonderful truth to all the world. That the God who created the universe, who keeps the planets in motion and the stars and galaxies together, who brings light out of darkness and life out of nothing, doesn’t want to be known as any of those things. He wants to be known as the God “who saves.” The Lord who takes away his people’s sin, and makes them one with him again. He chose a name for his Son that doesn’t just describe who his Son was, is, and will be. It also describes what his Father is like. He is the one who would call his Son “Our Savior.”

Conclusion

I close with a story about a preacher named D.M. Stearns, who happened to be preaching long ago here in Philadelphia. At the close of the service a stranger came up to him and said, “I don’t like the way you spoke about the cross. Instead of emphasizing the death of Christ, wouldn’t it be far better to preach Jesus, our teacher and example?”

Stearns replied, “If I presented Christ in that way, would you be willing to follow Him?”

“I certainly would,” said the stranger without hesitation.

Stearns said, “All right, let’s take the first step. He did no sin. Can you claim that for yourself?”

The man looked confused and somewhat surprised. “Why, no,” he said. “I acknowledge that I do sin.”

Stearns replied, “Then your greatest need is to have a Savior, not an example!

The Father could have called his Son “Moses,” recalling the first leader of Israel.

He could have called him “Adam,” recalling our first human father.

He could have named him “Rabboni,” which means teacher.

He chose none of those names. He chose Jesus – “The Lord saves.” Because above and beyond anything else Jesus taught or did, he saved us from the wrath of God. And for that, the name of Jesus ought always to have our highest praise.

Amen.