

The Virtue of Name-Calling

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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.

To return to our original example, the editors of Present Truth suggested that a separation be made between Karl Barth’s theology and his person, indicating that it is permissible to judge his theology, but not his person. Such a separation is foreign to the Scriptures. The reason one is not to call a brother Raca or Fool is that his theology is basically correct: He is a brother and has been regenerated by God. His theology is his person; as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he. Not only are we not to make a separation between a person’s theology and his person, we are commanded to judge another person by his theology. John, in 2 John, does not say that the theology of certain people is antichristian (though it is) nor does he say they speak lies (though they do). He calls the people antichrists and liars. He judges their persons by their theologies, and he commands the elect lady and her children to do the same. Worse still, from the point of view of the twentieth century—the bloodiest and most polite century in history—John commands the elect lady and her children not to show any hospitality to such liars and antichrists. It is not without significance that John first gives his reasons, then calls names, and then gives the command. Accurate identification is necessary to appropriate action. Unless that identification is made, the appropriate action will not follow. Witness the reluctance of denominations and institutions in twentieth-century America to dismiss employees and officers who deny the faith.

What, then, shall we say of Barth? Is he really a “monstrous miscreant”? Well, the Oxford English Dictionary says that “monstrous” means “outrageously wrong or absurd,” and “miscreant” means “a misbeliever, heretic; an ‘unbeliever’, ‘infidel’.” Is this phrase an accurate description of Barth? What does Barth say? The prophets and apostles as such, even in their office,^{1/4} were real historical men as we are, and ^{1/4} Actually guilty of error in their spoken and written word (Church Dogmatics, I, 2, 528-529). Like all ancient literature the Old and New Testaments know nothing of the distinction of fact and value ^{1/4} between history on the one hand and saga and legend on the other (I, 2, 509).

The vulnerability of the Bible, i.e., its capacity for error, also extends to its religious or theological content (I, 1,509).

In common with the creation story^{1/4}the history of the resurrection has to be regarded^{1/4}. as “saga” or “legend.” The death of Jesus Christ can certainly be thought of as history in the modern sense, but not the resurrection (IV, 1, 336).

The “legend” of the finding of the empty tomb is not of itself and as such the attestation of Jesus Christ as he showed himself alive after his death. It is ancillary to this attestation. The one can be as little verified “historically” as the other. Certainly the empty tomb cannot serve as an “historical” proof (IV, 1, 341).

These quotations, and there are many more, are sufficient to justify calling Barth a monstrous miscreant—or, in Biblical terms, a fool and a liar. To refuse to draw this conclusion about a man with the stature of Barth would be a sin, for only such an identification serves to warn the faithful. False teachers must be named, and the pusillanimous habits of Christians broken. Good etiquette, like peace and unity, must yield to the primacy of truth. Accurate name-calling is a virtue, not a sin. Just as Adam was given the task of naming the animals as an exercise of his rational faculties, so Christians are called upon to identify correctly the false teachers who prey upon the innocent and unlearned.