

The Lord Comes Near: Using *the Name of the Lord* in Counseling



by KRISTIN SILVA

Years ago I stood in a Christmas Eve service singing at the top of my lungs, “There is power in the name of Jesus...to break every chain.” We had already sung the traditional songs, and the service ended with this one. It is not a traditional song for a Christmas service, but it is an apt one, pointing to Christ’s incarnation as a display of power, as a new era of the name of the Lord. Emotionally I knew this fit. Celebrating the coming of Christ into the world was a tremendous reminder of power and victory. Indeed, it tells us that the evils in this world will be vanquished. It was a meaningful service for me, one that I still remember vividly years later. But it wasn’t until I began to ponder the meaning of the phrase—*the name of the Lord*—that I began to understand how truly appropriate it was to sing that song on Christmas Eve.

It is one of those phrases we know is significant. After all, it made its way into the Ten Commandments, where God instructed us to not take the name of the Lord in vain. In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus calls us to hallow our Father’s name. And the Jews took it so seriously, they would not utter it. And we instinctively know it’s wrong when we hear someone flippantly use Jesus’ name as a swear word—it’s jarring. The Lord’s name is holy and powerful! But as I pondered the phrase, I began to

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wonder if there was more to it than alluding to his power. Historically I've thought about it in a couple different ways. First, as a synonym for God himself—"No house had yet been built for *the name of the LORD*" (1 Kings 3:2). Or, as another way to talk about his reputation and his fame—"From a very distant country your servants have come, because of *the name of the LORD* your God. For we have heard a report of him, and all that he did in Egypt" (Josh 9:9). But more study revealed how much bigger it is than that. One theologian described this phrase as holding God's honor, fame, excellence, revelation, and all the different relationships he has with his people.¹ The significance of the name of the Lord is indeed broad and marvelous, and the task before us is to

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be curious about what unique emphasis it brings when Scripture employs it.

My goal here isn't to present a comprehensive theology for the name of the Lord. Not only is it too big of a task in an article such as this one, but for counselors to apply a rich truth like this effectively we must break it into bite-size pieces. We have to focus on *one* aspect of it in order to be able to meaningfully weave it into the details of someone's life. As I think of Scripture, I see it as a well-crafted meal with a wonderful combination of ingredients and flavors. My goal in counseling is to find that bite, that morsel, that will nourish the person in need. As I studied the name of the Lord, I began narrowing in on a single "flavor" that might fill the lives of those I walk with: how the name of the Lord is about him drawing near. And that is what the rest of the article is about—the flavor that filled my own heart and some ideas for how to bring it meaningfully into the lives of other people.

The Name of the Lord Means God Draws Near

Like many themes in Scripture, the name of the Lord moves along with redemptive history. It builds and expands as it points us forward to the day when we will dwell fully with our Lord. The phrase first appears at the beginning of Genesis and there it simply means that people began

1. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Volume 2: God and Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 99.

to worship God: “At that time people began to call upon the name of the Lord” (Gen 4:26). Interestingly, though they call on the name of the Lord, Scripture doesn’t contain a record of God revealing his actual name to his people until the time of Moses. In fact, God intentionally withholds his name in certain situations. He did so when he was wrestling with Jacob, for example (Gen 32:29). For God to reveal his name to his people means more than just giving them a moniker to call him.

In the broader culture of the time, names were believed to carry the essence of a being, so we can begin to understand why God might refrain

from giving his name until he deemed it the right time. He is the infinite God. Beyond comprehension. Beyond containing. Nothing can hold his essence. Nothing determines his existence except himself. And so, he waits to reveal his name until a moment in history when his people are particularly vulnerable and in need of a powerful rescuer. It’s in this moment that he tells Moses—“I AM WHO I AM.”...Say

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this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Ex 3:14). As we consider this development, we begin to grasp aspects of God’s character. We’re watching him descend from the heavens to make himself known to us using categories we can understand. These are categories he far transcends, that can’t contain him, but that he chooses to use out of his great love for his people. Where ancient cultures thought names held being, God tells his people that *his very name* is being. He—I AM—is the one who exists. And by giving them his name, he is inviting them to engage with him.² He continues to draw near in power.

This choice to come down and be held in a human category—this movement toward his people—is the aspect of the name of the Lord that we will continue to explore. You can already hear how this theme fits so well in a Christmas Eve service where we celebrate his drawing near in a new way through the incarnation. Jesus is God with us! But

2. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Volume 2*, 95–118. My thoughts about the condescension of the Lord into human language are largely formed by Herman Bavinck in his discussion on the biblical names of God.

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