

## What's in a Name?

Plenty! Think of your names—you probably have three of them: a given name, a middle name and a surname. The last was a genealogical tip of the hat to your forefathers, the middle could be as varied as the imagination of your parents, and your main name—the one you recognize as you when somebody calls it—that name is usually with you throughout your whole life.

Our three (or more) names are our legal identity, necessary to register our birth, marriage or death certificates, sign our driver's license, passport, tax identification, and much more. We need to protect our name from identity theft and make sure we are somehow clearly classified as different from another person who has the same name.

We know people by their names. But not just people: also, towns, states, countries, mountains, rivers, flora and fauna, storms, products, racing horses, rodeo bulls, and “much more.”

One of our first tasks when we lived among the Kewa people in Papua New Guinea was to learn their names. We soon found out that was not so easy: they had a name they used for official records, as when the government collected taxes from them, but they had names that only certain relatives could use, as well as “secret” names, nicknames, and (later) baptismal names. Sometimes the names were laid to rest with the corpse of the person, not to be mentioned again for fear of calling upon the spirit, who now “possessed” the name.

Popes, kings, and other important people often have Roman numerals after their names: like Pope John II, King Richard IV, and RGIII. The latter instance also shows how initials come to stand for the name, such as LBJ and JFK.

Fraternities, clubs and other groups assign Greek letters to their “houses” and insiders often have special names. This is also a feature of criminal names, such as Al “Scarface” Capone, Cadillac Frank, and Ice Pick Willie. Athletes love unique names too: note World Peace, King James, Teddy Ballgame, Black Mamba, and Yankee Clipper.

When Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers in Genesis 45:3 he says, “I am your brother Joseph,” and despite his Egyptian apparel, they immediately knew who he was. Names in Hebrew in the Bible invariably “mean” something, that is they point to a particular event or characteristic of the individual. Peter means “the rock” and Barnabas “the encourager,” but the name Satan or the Devil is associated with being the accuser, enemy, murderer, and ruler of darkness—to name just a few of his nicknames.

Do you have a nickname, perhaps only one that your spouse calls you? When I was a kid my folks would sometimes call me “angel,” not because I acted like one, but because they wished that I would! My brother Charles was “Chas” and his best friend was “Butch,” which sounds like he should have been a cowboy.

And speaking of cowboys, we probably have all heard (or should I say herd?) of the “Cowboy church.” I visited one near Midlothian and, driving in, we were welcomed by men and women on horses. The pastor wore a patterned shirt, bandana neck scarf, cowboy hat, jeans with a big buckle and cowboy boots. His sermon was punctuated with a number of cowboy and horse idioms. I have learned there is also a Cowboy church somewhere in Waco.

If we investigated and provided the names for churches, the pages would roll on and on. In Waco alone, I pulled up the names of over 100 and DaySpring was not even listed. Baptist churches are so frequent that in some towns there is often not only a “first Baptist,” but also a “second” or even a “third.” The names of the denominations can give us some clues about their theologies and histories: for example, Lutheran, Presbyterian, St. Louis Catholic, Nazarene, Seven Day Adventist, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Non-denominational.

I grew up in Pennsylvania—named after William Penn—near a town called Shickshinny, along the Susquehanna River, both Native American names. There is a long list of Native American named towns in the state, such as Macanaqua, Nanticoke, Aliquippa, Catasauqua, Conshohocken, Junita, and Towanda. In Pennsylvania alone, there were Native Americans from the Iroquois, Lenape, Delaware, Susquehanna, and Shawnee tribes.

Companies strive to establish their name brands—we immediately know what to associate with the names Apple, Kleenex, Nike, Lego, Amazon, Skype, Zoom and Google.

After the resurrection, Mary went looking for Jesus, but she mistook him for the gardener, and it wasn’t until Jesus called her name that she recognized him. In Isaiah 62:2 and Revelation 3:12, we read that we will be given a “new name,” in addition to the ones we are already known by, such as: believer, sheep, priest, brother, sister, servant, and friend. We are not short of names that represent Christians—we just need to live up to them.

Above all names, however, is the name we translate as “God.” His name is wonderful, honored, everlasting, great and holy. To curse using his name is an act of defiance and insolence. And there is also another of his names above every name and one in which we pray—it belongs to Jesus and, in the end, everyone will also bow to him. Let us be thankful for the power of his name!

Karl Franklin (after Ben, I am told)