

Editorial: Fundamentalist, moderate, liberal: There's just something about a name

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Names. We've used them since God brought the wild animals and birds to Adam to see what he would name them, "and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name" (Genesis 2:19).

Names are convenient. They convey a lot of information in a single word. They're a great shorthand way to refer to someone or something. Being shorthand, though, they require a reservoir of shared understanding about the information they contain.

For example, if the word zebra conjures in our separate imaginations a four-legged, black and white-striped, horse-like creature, then we can use the name "zebra" confident that we are talking about the same thing.

As another example, each of us has a first name and a last name. These two names set us apart from most of the rest of humanity, especially if the names are unique. The name Billy Graham brings to mind someone completely different than the name Bill Gates.

While proper names and nouns are useful, something happens when we try to use them too broadly. For example, instead of zebras, what if we are talking about categories like fundamentalist, moderate and liberal—or if you prefer, conservative, [centrist](#) and progressive? All of a sudden, we bump up against the limits of names.

We know we've bumped against the limit of a name when a person reacts strongly to that name. The reaction is an indication of past hurt.

As Christians, as people identified by a certain name, a name that implies we care about other people, we honor the name of Christ by acknowledging past hurts and by giving some consideration to the limits of names.

The usefulness of a name is its limit

Scholar and author N.T. Wright uses a helpful metaphor for the limits of names. In *Scripture and the Authority of God*, Wright explains how names—what he calls “shorthands”—are like suitcases, useful for carrying a lot of things around.

“But we should never forget that the point of [a suitcase] ... is that what has been packed away can then be unpacked and put to use in the new location. Too much debate about [beliefs] has had the form of people hitting one another with locked suitcases. It is time to unpack our [shorthands], to lay them out and inspect them,” he writes.

Names like fundamentalist, moderate and liberal are like Wright’s suitcases. They really need to be unpacked.

One evidence of the need to unpack these names is in people’s preference for alternate labels: conservative instead of fundamentalist, centrist in place of moderate, and progressive rather than liberal.

In the case of conservatives—a more encompassing name than fundamentalist—some agree with a range of theological positions within *fundamentalism* but wish to be differentiated from the behaviors of some *fundamentalists*.

A response from non-conservatives, particularly those farthest away from the conservative position, has been to accuse people who agree with any amount of fundamentalism as being no different—or better—than those fundamentalists with whom they don’t want to be identified. In other

words, if they agree with any of it, then they're guilty of all of it.

Not a particularly charitable or liberal view of other people.

From the above example, we see that a name like fundamentalist doesn't mean the same thing to everyone using the name. To some, it's a source of pride. To some, it's a source of hurt. To still others, it's a curse. To say nothing about what the name itself actually means.

But fundamentalists, moderates and liberals aren't zebras. They're more complicated. They're people.

We've stuffed too many people into the suitcases they carry.

Their ideas are fundamentalist, liberal or whatever. It says so on their suitcase. Better to shove them in and sit on the bag while we zip it closed and ship it off to a false address.

For starters, we need to remember a human is a human and a suitcase is a suitcase and not confuse the two.

Then, it's time we unpack our bags. It's time we sit down with each other and talk charitably through who we are, where we are and why. It's time we call each other by name and not by shorthand.

There's just something about a name

There's something about hearing our name spoken.

[Scientists have studied](#) what our brains do when we hear our name spoken. It's the sort of reading only a neurologist could love, but one of the research conclusions is that hearing one's name spoken—even while asleep—activates the brain in a way nothing else does.

We already know this, though. For instance, if our hearing is still good

enough, we can distinguish the sound of our name above the din of a crowded restaurant. We can ignore hundreds of names called, but when our order is ready and our name is called, we're dialed in. Of course, our hunger may enhance our hearing.

Speaking a name is a powerful thing.

Some children only hear their names spoken as a sort of curse. It comes out of their parents' mouths like poison, loaded with resentment, bitterness or regret.

Christians can perform a healing work in these children's lives merely by saying their names as a blessing, filling them with the wonder and promise of being created in the image of God.

Child, you are not forgotten. You are loved by God who made you.

Some people only hear categorical labels spoken as a sort of curse. It comes out of their opponents' mouths like poison, loaded with resentment, bitterness and anger.

Baptists, we've hurt each other, attacking one another with names, probably because they're quick and easy, and we can launch them from a safe distance.

I know there have been attempts in the past to undo the hurt. I know the success rate of those attempts hasn't been high. Probably because we feel justified in name-calling.

I also know the younger generations don't care about our names or why we use them. Instead, they want to focus on Jesus and what Jesus told us to do. Maybe the young just need to learn a thing or two so they don't repeat our mistakes. Or maybe we just need to learn from the young and give up our fighting.

The truth is we've carried these suitcases around too long. It's time to unpack them. It's time to sit down together and talk again.

After all, we are not zebras. We are those created in the image of God and given the ministry of reconciliation.

An excellent discussion of the use of shorthands can be found in the introduction to Alan Jacobs' book [How to Think](#), which of this writing is available in the Amazon Kindle Store for \$1.99. Jacobs is Distinguished Professor of Humanities in the Honors Program at Baylor University.

The earworms for this editorial are:

- ["You Never Even Called Me by My Name,"](#) David Allan Coe
- ["I Am Not Forgotten,"](#) Israel Houghton
- ["There's Just Something About that Name,"](#) Bill & Gloria Gaither

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