

Editorial: God's call does not excuse assault

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By now, most of us are aware Will Smith struck Chris Rock on live TV during the 2022 Academy Awards ceremony. We also likely are aware Smith made unmistakably clear he did not want Rock saying his wife's name.

We may have missed Smith seeming to suggest his actions somehow sprang from God's call on his life. We shouldn't ignore that.

The use of God's name too often lulls people of faith into overlooking subtle forms of abuse, opening the door to more blatantly egregious wrongs. We cannot ignore that.

God's name getting lost

Since that fateful night, media analysts have wondered whether Smith should have been allowed to stay front and center for the remainder of the televised ceremony, as he was. They have asked whether the academy blessed actual violence as much as it lives off enacted violence; sure seems like it did. They wondered if Rock would press charges against Smith. So far, he hasn't. They also are asking how far the academy should go in punishing Smith.

A point that grabbed my attention immediately but hasn't seemed to receive much attention in all this analysis is what Smith said about God.

Many have opined on [what Smith said](#) in his acceptance speech after receiving the best actor award—such as, “Art imitates life,” “Richard

Williams was a fierce defender of his family,” “Love will make you do crazy things,” and his statements about protecting people.

Less has been said about how Smith opened his speech: “In this time in my life, in this moment, I am overwhelmed by what God is calling on me to do and to be in this world. ... I’m being called on in my life to love people and to protect people ...”

Every Christian’s ears should have stood straight up when Smith invoked God’s name in the context of what was still fresh on everyone’s mind—the strike heard around the world.

We need to give attention to the insidiousness of invoking God’s name in such a moment.

Questioning God’s call

In what follows, I am commenting on the limited circumstances described above, not on Will Smith as a person. Since we don’t exactly hang out, I don’t know any more about him than what cameras captured.

When Smith took the mic after receiving the award, everyone in the room and watching from afar was paying close attention. After what he did just minutes before, what would he say? Anything he would or could say would be heard as a follow on to him striking and cussing Rock.

And Smith said ... “God is calling on me.”

This is a jarring statement, given the context. Once we get over the initial shock, we might be tempted to question the bare claim itself. Is God really calling Smith? This is a tricky suspicion, however, that brings into question anyone’s claim to be called by God.

Though Smith’s actions and words mitigate against his general claim to be

called by God, and to be called specifically to love people, the Old Testament contains plenty of evidence that such behavior does not in itself disprove God's call.

Even so, the juxtaposition of "God is calling on me" and "to love people" is incongruous within the context the words were spoken. When compared against the Gospels and Paul's descriptions of love, we ought to be dubious about God's call to love people including fists and f-bombs.

As to Smith feeling "overwhelmed by what God is calling on [him] to do and to be in this world," the truth is, lashing out is often an instinctual response of overwhelmed people. Perhaps his actions against Rock should be understood as an expression of being overwhelmed rather than Smith's sense of call.

Here again, we have to approach any suspicion of God's call on Smith carefully, especially given the witness of Scripture and the troubling things God did call people to do. This is where invoking God's name as justification for violence toes the line of insidiousness.

Using God's call

Whether God is calling Smith or what that call may entail, for Smith to tie his actions to God's direction was as much a deflection as calling himself a protector and defender was a "just war" rationalization for throwing a punch.

Citing God's call after committing violence against another person is an attempt to redirect blame beyond condemnation. It's Flip Wilson in reverse: "God made me do it."

Wilson didn't expect to get away with misbehavior by pinning it on the devil, but Will pinning his wrongdoing on God performs a particularly

insidious act. There's recourse if the devil's to blame, but if God's to blame, what's a person to do but accept the will of God?

That we are on shaky ground questioning God's call on another person is precisely why using God's call to justify violent actions is so insidious. It puts God-fearing people between a rock and a hard place with little to do but doubt God or accept God's apparent will. It's a false choice and a form of spiritual abuse.

What Will Smith did on live TV, too many are doing in the privacy of their own homes or the small circle of their workplaces, schools, communities or churches. And most of them don't have a global public witnessing their actions, making it all the easier to hide.

Outside public scrutiny, some of those inflicting physical and verbal harm on others are doing something else Smith did; they are justifying it with God's name. When they do, we should not doubt God; we should doubt the claimant.

Smith issued a [mea culpa on Instagram](#) the following day and [resigned from the academy](#) a few days later. They were right things to do, even if they were in service of salvaging his reputation. Both seem to indicate he does not see his striking and cussing Rock as in line with whatever God is calling him to do and to be.

God does call us, that call can be overwhelming, and we must be careful what we use God's call to excuse.

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