

Voices: For Christ's sake, don't misuse the Lord's name

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"For Christ's sake!"

As a Christian, not to mention a pastor, I'm not supposed to say that. I was taught from an early age exclamations like that one—along with "Oh my God," "Jesus Christ," and "Good God," and a few more explicit offerings—not only were disrespectful, but sinful.

The third commandment, I was told, said not to take the name of the Lord in vain. To this day, when I stub my toe or get cut off in traffic, you're likely to hear, "Good grief," or, "Oh my gosh." I was trained well.

Nevertheless, even as a child, the third commandment always seemed like an odd one to include in God's Top 10. To put it on the same list as "do not steal" and "do not murder"—indeed, higher up the list than both of those—always felt kind of strange to me. But I was a good Sunday school student; so, I went with it. No OMGs for me.

Misusing the Lord's name without cussing

It wasn't until my formal training to become a preacher, first with religion classes at Baylor and then at Truett Theological Seminary, that I acquired a better understanding of what it means to take God's name in vain.

My Sunday school teachers had been right fundamentally; it means to misuse the holy name of the Lord. But in the adult world, it turned out, there were far more sinister ways to misuse the Lord's name than with

playground curses.

It turns out, the name of the Lord is an awfully powerful thing—which makes it something people are quick to weaponize. If you want to abuse or control people, there are few easier ways to rally support than by arguing you are acting in God's name. Indeed, you can break just about any of the other nine commandments, so long as you invoke the Lord—and you'll have backers.

For my entire life, there have been powerful people in the world of evangelical Christianity who have risen to their positions and maintained them by taking the Lord's name in vain. Some were loud cranks, easily dismissed by almost everyone inside and outside the church.

Others were slick televangelists, mocked by the masses even as they shamelessly exploited the poor and the marginalized to build their kingdoms. Still others were megachurch pastors whose stars shined brightly until their socially acceptable sins—greed, pride—gave way to more distasteful vices—adultery, embezzlement.

The power of misusing the Lord's name

But far more dangerous than these were the Christian pastors, professors, authors and business leaders who looked to the halls of earthly power and decided they wanted a piece of the action—and used the Lord's name to get there.

Armed with select Bible verses and allied with select politicians, they spent decades convincing us God's will and the American dream were one and the same, that the flag and the cross belonged together now and forever.

It worked. When rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, they did so

wearing T-shirts that read: “God. Guns. Trump.” They carried red, white and blue flags announcing, “JESUS SAVES,” even as they destroyed property and intimidated Capitol police. Like modern-day Israelites tearing down a modern-day Jericho, they went into battle convinced God was on their side.

Reclaim honor due the Lord’s name

After not just months but years, not just years but decades, it’s long past time for all evangelicals to call this American Christian nationalism what it is—a dangerous, disgraceful violation of the third commandment. A cynical abuse of the divine. An abomination and a desecration of the holy.

When God’s name becomes a vehicle for your political ideology, you have taken it in vain. When God’s word becomes a sourcebook for your ambitions, you have committed hermeneutical malpractice. When God’s will is used to justify sin, you reveal yourself as a charlatan.

America is my home, the land I love, but it is not the Promised Land. Governmental leaders are worthy of my respect, but not my allegiance. The flag deserves my respect, but never my worship.

After so long hearing the lie that “real Christians” must think, feel and vote a certain way, it is time to reclaim the Baptist distinctive of a separation between church and state. It is time for our faith to inform our politics, instead of the other way around. It is time for us to bear God’s name, not in the pursuit of power, but in the pursuit of justice, mercy and love.

It’s time to stop taking the Lord’s name in vain—for Christ’s sake.

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