

“In Jesus’ Name” Is More Than a Closing Phrase of a Christian’s Prayer

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UDK 2-534.3:27-246:27-31
Original scientific paper
Received: February, 2015
Accepted: May, 2015

Abstract

“In Jesus Name” has become a “catch phrase” with which to conclude a Christian prayer. This article attempts to seriously challenge a “simple” understanding of this important phrase by examining the teaching of the New Testament. To invoke the name of Jesus was to identify the follower of Jesus as one who belongs to Christ and shares the life of Christ with all the challenges, responsibilities, and privileges that is incumbent upon that relationship. Life is to be lived, words are to be spoken, and activities are to be done with serious consideration of the authority and responsibility that is demanded by “in the name of Jesus Christ.”

Most prayers uttered by Christians are concluded with the phrase, “in Jesus’ name, Amen.” As a child I thought “Christian prayers” had the basic formula of beginning by addressing God as “Father” and ending with “in Jesus’ name, Amen.” No one explained *why* Christians pray following that pattern, but “growing up in church” this writer assumed it must be correct because all the people I knew prayed that way. To end both formal and informal prayers with that phrase sounds “Christian”, and when begun by addressing God, our Father, the prayer includes two persons of the Trinity. Such praying must be good and correct, because it seems to be the “approved” and “accepted” way praying is done by Christians everywhere.

Jesus Himself addressed His prayers to *His* Father and taught His followers to

do the same.¹ Paul told the Galatian Christians that through the Spirit they were to address God as “Abba, Father” (Gal 4:6). But what about that ending, “in Jesus’ name, Amen”? The Synoptic Gospels do not have Jesus giving any such instruction. It is from the Gospel of John that we learn about making our request “in Jesus’ name”. This instruction comes by way of a promise in the closing hours of Jesus’ life. However, Jesus in this very intimate discourse with his closest disciples is addressing the use of His name in a much more serious aspect than a closing punctuation phrase.²

The teaching of Jesus and the New Testament writers concerning “in His name” was significantly more than about prayer; rather it involved promises and challenges which encompass the total life of the believer. The Synoptic Gospels record Jesus speaking about “welcoming in my name” (Mat 18:5, Mk 9:37, Lk 9:48). The phrase ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι μου (Mk 9:39; 13:6; Lk 9:48) has the meaning “on the basis of” (H. Bietenhard, TDNT V, 277), and qualifies the action, not the recipient.³ In the Luke 9:48 passage the welcoming of a “child”, one who is weak or insignificant, carries the promise for a Jesus follower of “welcoming” both Jesus and His Father. Matthew in Chapter 18 has Jesus expanding “in my name” to identify the gathered community. The topic is discipline among and between believers. To gather “in His name” is to experience His presence. In the words of D. A. Hagner, “In my name” is another way of saying ‘under my rule.’ This presence of Jesus is the literal presence of the resurrected Christ, in keeping with the promise to be articulated in 28:20.”⁴ The final sayings of Jesus concerning “in my name” (Luke 21:8-36) concern the challenge and promise of opposition and persecution.⁵ In this context Jesus is clearly addressing those followers who will represent Him after the resurrection.

There is debate concerning whether these comments refer only to the imme-

- 1 Of the times the Synoptic Gospels record Jesus praying, Jesus most often prayed addressing His Father. When teaching about prayer to His disciples, they were told to speak to God in the same intimate way, as “our Father” (see Mat 6:6-18; 7:11; 18:19).
- 2 Asking in Jesus’s name promises response by Jesus Himself, so that the Father might be glorified in the Son (14:13). Asking and receiving “in His Name” is a demonstration that we are loved by the Father, *because we love Jesus and believe that He is the sent one by the Father* (16:27). Asking and receiving “in His name” provides joy in both the disciple and in Jesus (16:24).
- 3 Marshall, I. H. (1978). *The Gospel of Luke: A commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (396). Exeter: Paternoster Press.
- 4 Hagner, D. A. (1998). *Vol. 33B: Matthew 14–28*. Word Biblical Commentary (533). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.
- 5 I have omitted the Mark 16:17 passage because of the challenges of the text (16:9-20) being genuine.

ciate disciples or to all who would testify and represent Jesus in the age to come. However, it is clear that this teaching of Jesus concerning "in my name" involves much, much more than a request or thanksgiving offered in prayer. Jesus promised seizure and persecution "on account of my name", but he also promised His presence. His followers would speak in His name. They would amaze kings and rulers with their words spoken in His name. There was the promise of "words and wisdom" coming from Jesus Himself in speaking for His name's sake. But such testimony would result in hatred. Even parents and siblings would turn against those representing Jesus and acting "in His name".

In his account of the birth and development of the first generation church, Luke gives witness to what Jesus taught concerning "in my name" within the life and ministry of those who believed "in His name." The apostles gave more than "a cup of water" in His name. They gave healing in His name (Acts 3:6). They gave the message of salvation, the forgiveness of sins by believing and being baptized "in (or into) His name" (Acts 2:38ff). They gave welcome and acceptance in His name (Acts 10-11 necessitated by the extra prompting by the risen Christ). They experienced the fellowship of His presence as they gathered "in His name" (Acts 4:23-31). They also experienced the promised persecution and empowerment as they represented Jesus and spoke "in His name" (Acts 4:1-22). As the apostles and other followers of Jesus spoke of His name and "in His name", more was offered and experienced than what Jesus expressly affirmed in the Gospels. The challenge was extended and claimed to "believe in His name." Forgiveness of sins was promised "in His name." Entrance into the community of the Spirit-filled followers of the Way was based upon belief and baptism into the name of Jesus (Acts 2:41-47). The thrilling stories of persecution and victory, as recorded by the writer of Luke/Acts, were continually in the context of the followers of Jesus speaking and acting "in the name" of Jesus. According to the written record, salvation, in the full meaning of that term, was found in and *only in* "the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:12).

Many of the additional documents of the New Testament develop theological understanding and practical instruction concerning "in the name of Jesus". The message of 1 Peter is, "If you are insulted because of the *name*⁶ of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you." Then the writer continues, ". . . if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you *bear that name*" (1 Peter 4:14, 16). The writer of Hebrews affirms and challenges with these words, "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly *profess His name*" (Hebrews 13:15). 1 John identifies the fundamental command of God as this, "*to believe in the name of his*

6 Italics are mine to bring focus on the believer's relation to His name.

Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as He commanded us” (1 John 3:23). In his epistle he gives his reason for the writing of this epistle: “I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for *His name’s sake*” (1 John 2:12), and again, “I write these things to you who *believe in the name of the Son of God* so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13).

Although the apostle Paul echoes the understandings of “in the name of Jesus Christ” found in the examples and teachings of Acts and other New Testament writings,⁷ he repeatedly emphasizes the importance of that name that “is above every name” (Phil 2:9). The believers at Corinth are part of the church because they were “*baptized in the name of Jesus*” and no one else (1 Cor 1:10-13), so all party identification and feeling of superiority must halt. He affirms that everything that Christians are and have is because of Jesus and in His name—“you were washed, you were sanctified, you were *justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Cor. 6:11). Paul is so captivated by the name of Jesus Christ and so aware that all he is and has is because of Jesus that he affirms in his letter to the Philippian church:

. . . God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:9-11)

The most definitive teaching by Paul concerning the supremacy of Jesus and all that is bound up in the name of Jesus Christ is found in his epistle to the church at Colossae. He addresses them as “holy people . . . faithful brothers and sisters” because they are “in Christ”. He identifies his goal for them is to “know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3). He challenges them, “just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in Him, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught” (Col 2:6-7). Paul reminds these brothers and sisters that Jesus is the Son the Father loves and that they have forgiveness of sins and redemption through Him. As Paul writes he strings the realities of Jesus as a jeweler might attach precious pearls to a necklace. Jesus is the “image of God”; He, Jesus, is “the creator of all”; He is the “purpose of all that is created”; He is the power that “holds everything together”; He is “the beginning”; He is “head of the church”; He is *all this* so that “in everything he might have the supremacy”. Paul concludes, “God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him (Jesus) and

7 Paul interprets Joel 2:1 as calling on the Name of Lord as confessing “Jesus is Lord” (Romans 10:8-11). He recognized the church of God as those who “are be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours” (1 Cor 1:2).

through Him reconcile to Himself all things, on earth, and in heaven" (Col 1:15-20). Paul reminds these believers that they were "marked" by Christ to belong to God.⁸ He continues the reminder that in their baptism they shared the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus as they trusted in the power of God who raised Jesus from the grave. They have been made alive *with Christ* (Col 2:9-14). All of this is *in Christ Jesus, because of Christ Jesus, through Christ Jesus, and with Christ Jesus.*⁹ Paul asserts that the life which the believer has following his participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus through his faith expressed in baptism is a life shared with Jesus Christ (Col 2:12-13, 3:3).

In this epistle Paul does not stop with his theological understanding of what it means for the Colossian believers to have their relationship with the eternal in Christ and "in His name". The apostle becomes the "practical theologian" and seeks to apply how this life "in the name of Jesus Christ" expresses itself. The believer, who has entered into relationship with Christ, must not allow himself to be "judged by religious rules" such as special days, religious festivals, foods, fasts, or Sabbath days. The believer is to find meaning in these activities for himself, if there is any, only as such activity reflects Christ or finds fulfillment in Christ (Col 2:16-23). The practical instruction includes not acting in ways that characterize a life outside a relationship with the Holy God.¹⁰ The person "in Christ" is to reflect the qualities and virtues of the person whose life he shares, Jesus Christ (Col 3:12-14).¹¹ Family relationships (husbands to wives, parents to children, children to parents) are all to reflect one's relationship with Jesus and are to be carried out in a way which would please Christ (Col 3:18-21). Working relationships (employee to employer and/or employer to employee)¹² are to be carried out in the purposeful context of the Jesus follower and his relationship with Jesus Christ. Although work in the present is carried out in the context of earthly relationships, every task becomes a purposeful service given to Jesus, the believer's Lord and Life. Every work activity or interpersonal activity becomes

8 Paul used the image of "circumcision"—the identification action that identified all Jews as belonging to God.

9 For an excellent and beautiful discussion concerning these relationships found with Jesus Christ see John R.W. Stott, *Life in Christ*, Baker Books, 1996.

10 Lists of virtues and vices are common in Pauline literature (Rom. 1:29–32; 1 Cor. 5:9–11; 6:9–10; Gal. 5:19–23; Phil. 4:8; 1 Tim. 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9).

11 These virtues reflect how God identified Himself in Exodus 34:6-7 and the character of Jesus as the Gospels present Him. Jesus was known to be "full of compassion" kind, gentle, patient, and forgiving. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 presents these qualities as the very definition of love.

12 The text addresses "slave to master and/or master to slave", but the clear implication for the 21st century is in relationship tasks assigned in a working relationship.

an act of worship¹³ for the one who is in a faith relationship with Jesus (Col 3:22-4:1).

The apostle gives instruction as to how such a “Christ-reflected” life is possible. Through the death of Jesus, God reconciles to Himself the person who has faith in the power of God which is expressed in the resurrection of Jesus. When such a person expresses his faith and personal identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus, God makes that person alive *with* Christ (Col. 2:12-13). Paul affirms that this wonderful news that Christ Himself now resides in the life of the believers is the “riches of the mystery” of God. This reality is “the word of God in all its fullness.” It is the message that Paul has been commissioned by God to communicate to the Gentiles in all its fullness (Col 1:25-27). Those who have been made alive with Christ are challenged to let the peace of Christ rule in their hearts. They are instructed to let the “word” of Christ live in their lives in abundance. They are to teach and admonish each other with the word of Christ and in the singing of psalms, hymns and songs of the Spirit. All of this is to be done with the giving of thanks to God who makes it all possible (Col 3:15-17).

It is within this epistle that totally focuses on the follower of Jesus and the relationship which God has provided *with* Jesus, *in* Jesus, *through* Jesus, and *because of* Jesus (his death and resurrection) that Paul addresses “in the name of Jesus”. The apostle writes, “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it in the name of Jesus”. Of course, a prayer might be offered “in the name of Jesus.” A request or a word of thanksgiving offered “in the name of Jesus” would surely be heard by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. These words addressed to our God and Father because of the shared “sonship” provided by Jesus, offered in relationship to Jesus and in His name, will surely be heard by the Father. Such a prayer - whether expressed out loud or only in the heart - contains “words” to be expressed “in the name of the Lord Jesus”. However, the instruction of Paul concerning “in the name of Jesus” is infinitely more far reaching than simply an expression with which to close a prayer.

What is meant by “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”? One meaning is surely a life lived in obedience to the *Lord* Jesus Christ. The life of one who has been ransomed by Jesus is a life that recognizes, “You are not your own, you were bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 6:20). Those who have identified themselves by the name of Jesus because they “have faith in Him” (trust Him) reflect that identification by obeying the Lord Jesus. By indicating “whatever” and “all”, O’Brien points out the Christian’s whole life must be lived in obedience to the

13 See also Romans 12:1 where Paul urges brothers in Christ to present themselves and their continual activity to God, which becomes their “liturgy of worship”.

Lord Jesus.¹⁴

Luter suggests in this context that "all of life is to be lived under the conscious authority of Christ and in active allegiance to His magnificent person."¹⁵ One is to thoughtfully speak and act as an "ambassador of Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:20). Or, as Peter writes, "whoever speaks, he should do it as one speaking the words of God" (1 Peter 4:11). Authority demands responsibility. Words spoken and lives lived by those who have been united with Jesus Christ are responsible to Him. The reader is reminded that when one is baptized "in (or into) the name of Jesus" he is to live and speak with that responsibility, keeping his words and actions consistent with the teachings, life and commands of Jesus.

Throughout this epistle Paul has reminded the Colossian believers that their new existence is found in Christ Jesus. He continually affirms the principle that there is no other name by which humanity might be saved. Reconciliation, redemption, the forgiveness of sins, new life, the promise of eternal life, inclusion into the people of God, and being qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints in the Kingdom of God's Son are ALL in relation to and because of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, doing "words" and "deeds" in the name of Jesus surely includes making Jesus the focus of proclamation, both in "words" and "deeds." This is what Epaphras had done when he came to Colossae and communicated "the word of truth, the gospel" to them. Paul reminds them that it was this gospel that they heard and believed and which was producing fruit all over the world. It was the proclamation of His name as well as speaking in His name that brought the multiplication of followers in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, about which Luke wrote. Peter told a crowd in Jerusalem that by "faith in the name of Jesus" and "faith that comes through him" healing and strength came to one crippled from birth (Acts 3:16). Peter then repeated this same truth before the Sanhedrin. Speaking Jesus' name and teaching in His name was strictly forbidden by the religious rulers, but the apostles and other disciples would not stop "teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 4-5).

From reading the record of the birth and expansion of the church as well as the written communication through the Epistles, it appears that Jesus is the primary focus. Stott writes it well, "... the New Testament lays claim to a unity of message and that message is the gospel of Christ" (Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*).¹⁶ All that was

14 O'Brien, P. T. (1998). *Vol. 44: Colossians, Philemon*. Word Biblical Commentary (211). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

15 *Dictionary of Paul and his letters*. 1993 (G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin & D. G. Reid, Ed.) (627). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

16 John R. W. Stott surveys in *The Incomparable Christ* section by section and identifies the single notifying feature as the message and implications originating with Jesus.

written and all that was done were to communicate and clarify the person and work of Jesus Christ in the cross event and in the transformation and maturing process experienced through Him and “in His name.” To observe Him and hear His words is to be confronted with the very “image of God”. To learn of Him and to experience through faith what He provides “in His name” combine to discover the “mystery of God.” It is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who makes God, the Father, fully known. One of the four who followed Jesus first wrote, “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). The Gospels and Epistles unite to affirm that rest, peace, and life are found in Him and Him alone.

What does it mean to do “whatever” and “all”, whether in word or deed, “in the name of Christ”? It becomes obvious that more is involved than even a *purposeful* ending to a believer’s prayer. One who shares life with Jesus is called to live purposefully in the context of Jesus’ name. He welcomes children and the weak “in Jesus’ name.” He serves and does his daily activities in the awareness that in those activities he represents Jesus and the total community that is called “by His name.” The believer is to become conscious that his speech and all of his words in teaching, preaching or in casual conversation are to honor and reflect the One into whom he was baptized. All relationships, whether job related or social, whether casual or the most intimate, are in the “holy” context of “Jesus’ name”. Words and deeds become challenging opportunities to expose life “in His name” and under His gracious rule. In the larger context of the New Testament teaching, all words and deeds—whenever, wherever, and whatever—find evangelistic implications as each word and activity is done in Jesus’ name. “In Jesus’ name” need not always be expressed orally, but when spoken or performed purposefully “in Jesus’ name,” the deed or word might possibly elicit a question, the reason for that action or word of grace or service of care. Then would come the opportunity for clear annunciation, “done in Jesus’ name.” Purposeful thinking, talking, serving, and living “in the name of Jesus” would reflect the picture that is recorded in Acts. Perhaps there might be multiplication of disciples; perhaps renewed respect and awe by the community; even persecution on the part of religious leaders. When placed in the larger teaching of the New Testament, doing all and whatever, and especially speaking words “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ”, transforms our generic reference to God to a more specific reference to Jesus, the Christ who is Lord. The 21st century references to a generic God bring very little or no clarity to an understanding of Who or what we believe. When Jesus Christ our Lord assumes His rightful place in word and deed, Jesus followers, who find their identity and life “in His name”, might find themselves heroic characters in the kingdom of light, the Kingdom of the Son our Father loves.

In Jesus’ name, AMEN!

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„U Isusovo ime“ više je od završne fraze kršćanske molitve

Sažetak

„U Isusovo ime“ postala je popularna fraza kojom se završavaju kršćanske molitve. Ovaj članak nastoji ozbiljno osporiti "jednostavno" razumijevanje ove važne fraze, istražujući što naučava Novi zavjet. Zazvati ime Isus značilo je odrediti Isusova sljedbenika, kao onoga koji pripada Kristu i dijeli Kristov život uza sve izazove, odgovornosti i privilegije koji su vezani uz taj odnos. Život treba živjeti, riječi treba govoriti i djela treba činiti, ozbiljno razmatrajući autoritet i odgovornosti koje zahtijeva izraz „u ime Isusa Krista“.