

Genesis 17:1-8
John 1:35-42

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GROWING INTO YOUR NAME

He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter). *John 1:42*

“Jack” Wilson Baughman. That’s our new grandchild’s name. He doesn’t know it yet, but it’s a name he’ll grow into. I liked the name from the first time I heard it right after his birth—a seamless birth compared to last time.

“Jack”—it’s the name of his departed, beloved great grandfather on Michael’s side. A name that all the Baughman family resonate to because they knew and loved him. It’s related to the biblical John, from whom our text comes.

“Wilson”—when I heard it my heart soared because we three Wilson boys had five daughters, and the one son also had three daughters, and that would have been the end of the Wilson name. So I am thrilled it has another generation. There’s certainly no shortage of Wilson’s— isn’t that right, Hank? Still, it’s a lovely thing.

“Baughman” comes from the Old and Middle German for tree. As green a name as you could wish for, and befitting Michael’s six foot five frame.

When you start cloaking these names in family stories they take on whole new dimension of meaning. I didn’t know until about eight years ago why I was named Victor. On his last mission in World War 2 my Dad’s Lancaster bomber wasn’t their usual airplane, which had been undergoing repairs after being badly shot up a couple of nights before. But as they taxied for takeoff, they saw their own plane moving from its repair hanger back toward the squadron. It was a bittersweet moment. It had returned them safely from a dozen night raids over Germany. It had been their faithful companion, and they missed it. Its call sign was “Victor.”

A name is so important that it attaches to the one lifelong document that is vital to launch us into life, our birth certificate, and the only necessary thing on our final place of rest—a gravestone or memorial book. Everything coalesces about the name—remembrances, feelings, love, fear...! The more you know about the bearer, the more the name means. Choosing a name is not like going to the Acme.

Clarence Jordan, the folksy southern preacher and author of the *Cotton*

Patch Gospel tells of being home from college years ago and getting lost in the woods while out hunting.

“I finally came to a little clearing,” he said, “and there was an old farmer, sitting on his porch, chewing tobacco. I didn't know who he was, but I went up to him and I asked him how I could get to such and such a road. He sat there chewing and looking at me with piercing eyes. He didn't answer my question. He looked at me and said, ‘I know who you are.’”

Jordan said, “Well, I don't think so, sir. I have never been in these parts before. I'm lost. I don't think you've ever seen me.”

“Yes, I know who you are. You're Jim Jordan's boy, ain't ya?”

“Yes, sir,” said a stunned Jordan, “that's right. How'd you know?”

“Well,” he said, “you're just the spittin' image of him.”

“He had seen in me,” said Clarence Jordan, “the image of my father.”

Without a name on his forehead or an introduction, he had known who Jordan was. The farmer said, “Image.” Actually, he said “spittin' image.” Paul Goodwin once told me that black folk in the South years ago slipped into that phrase as a shortened form of “spirit and image” implying that someone was the spirit and image of the parent. That was what identified him.

Now, wouldn't that be a wonderful way to wear a name—in the image of the Father, God our parent. Such that when others see people of peace, reconciling people, long suffering people, merciful people, humble and kind people, courageous, honorable, faithful people, they know whose you are and who you are, children grown up into the image of the Father. It gives a whole new dimension to a “Christian name!”

A name intends to convey not only past associations but also bears the hope we have in the child for the future. Surely, even the most cynical parent would not name their newborn son Judas! We wish for the best in them to prevail. We want them to have a good name, a respected name. We ask God to bless the name at baptism, to prosper it and make it a harbinger of good. For a good name “is to be chosen above riches” (Prov. 22:1).

A name is something we grow into. It embodies who and what we are and it shapes what people think of us. When a child is christened, given a “Christian name” before God at baptism, the name is linked to God as a child of God: Victor Christian; Jane Christian; Jack Christian. This past week I wrote a check to a man who had done some work for us, whose name is Colin Christian. It's hard to disassociate the name and the image. Our pledge is to make Christ known through our name, our *Christ*-ian name. We are accountable to God for what we make of the name; whether the presence of Christ is recalled or obscured when people bring our name to mind. Which is why Ecclesiastes (7:1) says, in an otherwise slippery passage, “a good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than

the day of birth.” The sense being that we carry a good name back to God and it is the only baggage we are allowed. It assures us of a blessed reception. That’s really what this Christian life is all about, radiating Christ in such a way that other people recognize the one who brings us alive. So two parents stand before the congregation in the full presence of God at their child’s baptism, and the minister asks, “What are the names of this child before Christ?” And perhaps shifting a little nervously within because of all the hope and promise that they have in their responsibility toward the child, they give the name. I never saw anyone do it glibly.

Both texts today illustrate the point that a name is something to grow into. Abram, whose name first means “father of the exalted,” suggesting the few, has his name changed in chapter 17 to Abraham meaning “father of the multitude.” Growing into that new name must have required a huge commitment of faith from a man who was pushing 100 and still childless. And when a son by his natural wife, Sarah, does arrive, it is by the slenderest of threads, one child, which the promise of a multitude hangs. Yet the Genesis story will not be done with Abraham until this old man has indeed grown into his new name and become the father of the household of faith. We still call him that.

A good name is cultivated over the years. Shakespeare’s Othello put it perfectly:

Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls:
Who steals my purse steals trash; ’tis something, nothing;
’Twas mine, ’tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed. (*Othello*, Act III, 3: 155ff.)

Amen.