

**YOU SHALL NOT MAKE WRONGFUL USE
OF THE NAME OF YAHWEH**

Exod 20:7

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“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, *under God*, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” Should the phrase “under God” be stricken from the “Pledge of Allegiance”? Some say, “Yes” and some say, “No”—and the discussion soon becomes heated as both sides debate the issue. According to certain courts of law, the phrase “under God” advocates and advances religion and is, therefore, prohibited by the First Amendment. Others, see the First Amendment as protecting the phrase “under God” since it permits freedom of speech. But for me, the question is not, “Does the phrase ‘under God’ advance a particular religious ideology?” The question for me is, “Does the phrase ‘one nation under God’ accurately describe America?” If the statement is not true, it should be stricken from the Pledge, for then it is nothing more than a “vain use” of the name of God.

Our money declares, “In God We Trust.” And yet, many Americans are more concerned about the decisions of the Federal Reserve Board than they are about the decrees of God. Alan Greenspan is not God, but he has probably had more impact on the daily lives of many Americans than God has had. Is the statement on U.S. currency true? If not, then it is nothing more than a “vain use” of the name of God.

In countries where Islamic religion is the basis for civil law, the use of the name “Allah” in an irreverent manner is grounds for punishment. Do those people have more respect for the name of a god whose reality we deny that we have for the one true God whom we worship? From the way we treat the sacred name of our God, one might be tempted to think so.

Romeo asks, “What’s in a name?” adding “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Romeo is wrong. Names are more than arbitrary labels. We meet a stranger and

ask, “What is your name?” To tell a stranger your name can be among the most intimate of human exchanges. There is power in a name, power in being able to call someone by name.

In Exodus chapter 3, God summons Moses by means of a burning bush and sends him to Pharaoh to seek the release of the Israelites. We pick up the story in verse 11.¹

But Moses answered God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should free the Israelites from Egypt?” God immediately replied, “The point is, **I AM** with you. And this will serve as proof that I have sent you: When you have freed the people from Egypt, you will return here to worship God at this very mountain.”

Then Moses asked God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites, and I tell them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ — What am I to say to them?” And God answered Moses, “**I AM WHO I AM.**” He continued, “You tell the Israelites, ‘**I AM** has sent me to you.’” God said still more to Moses: “You tell the Israelites, ‘**Yahweh**, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob has sent me to you. —

This is My name forever,
the name by which I am to be remembered for all generations”
(Exod 3:11-15).

It is somewhat humorous to observe the words of Moses as he responds to God. He begins with “Here I am” (3:4) which becomes “Who am I?” (3:11) which turns into “Who are you?” (3:13). Ultimately, the question becomes not “Who is Moses?” but “Who is *with* Moses?”

The name of God—what is it? The most common translation is “I AM WHO I AM.” Other translations include: “I AM THAT I AM,” “I AM THE ONE WHO ALWAYS IS,” “I WILL BE WHO/WHAT I WILL BE,” “I WILL CAUSE TO BE WHAT I WILL CAUSE TO BE,” and—“I WILL BE WHO I AM / I AM WHO I WILL BE.” Then we are given the personal divine name “Yahweh [יהוה] – YHWH.” “Jehovah” is an artificial form of this name, and most modern translations use the word “LORD”—spelled with capital letters—to stand for the divine name. Whatever else may be the meaning, there is an attempt in these verses to explain the name Yahweh on the basis of the verb יהי - *hayah* —which means, “to be.” Perhaps the most fruitful approach for

¹Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

understanding God's name is to examine the context in which the name is given. In 3:12, God says to Moses, "I will be with you." Then in 3:17, God declares, "I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt." God reassures Moses in 4:12 and 15 with these words: "I will be with your mouth." Finally, in 6:7 God promises, "I will be your God." The essence of what is being said is: *I will be God for you*. The force is not simply that God is or that God is present, but that God will be faithfully God for Israel. God's name is rooted in the reality of God's presence and God's power: *I am with you; I will help you*. Yahweh—the very name is a promise of God's presence and God's power. Yahweh—the very name proclaims that God is with us and that God will help us. We should respond saying, "Hallelujah!"—which exclamation comes from the Hebrew *hallelu*—"to praise"—and *yah*—the shortened form of Yahweh. Hallelujah!—Praise Yahweh!

Like Moses, we had to be told God's name. *And because we had to be told God's name, we cannot make God mean anything we want*. God must reveal who "I AM" is through loving actions toward Israel and by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. You cannot get this name by taking long walks in the woods, hugging trees, delving into your psyche, sitting quietly in your room, or getting in touch with your inner child. This God Yahweh can only be known through the revelation of Himself in words and deeds.

Now we are ready for Exodus chapter 20, beginning at verse 1:

Then God spoke all of these words saying: "I am **Yahweh**, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods in My presence."

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is on the earth below, or that is in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down in worship to them nor shall you serve them, because I, **Yahweh** your God, am El Qanna [a jealous God], punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but lavishing loyal-love to a thousand [generations] of those who love Me and obey My commandments" (20:1-6).

This brings us to the third of the Ten Commandments:

"You shall not make wrongful use of the name of **Yahweh** your God, for **Yahweh** will not let you go unpunished if you make wrongful use of His name" (20:7).

This commandment is probably best known as: "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain" (KJV).

This command is often misunderstood and misapplied when it is taken to refer to “bad” and vulgar language. Yes, “right speech” is indeed important, but more is at stake than merely not cursing or not uttering profanities. What must be understood is that the “name” of Yahweh expresses God’s powerful presence and purpose. To invoke the “name” of Yahweh for any purpose other than God’s purposes is to “make wrongful use of the name of Yahweh.” To call upon the “name” Yahweh to condone any cause other than cause of God is to “take the name of the LORD thy God in vain.”

Please listen to me carefully, because I do not want to sound unpatriotic or anti-America. I am deeply disturbed by the all-too-common use of the expression “God bless America.” More often than not, it is used in the sense of invoking God to further *our* agenda. God is called upon as a tool, as a means to an end. We seek His presence and His power to validate *our* decisions and to grant victory for *our* actions. God becomes the weapon of choice for American policy and practice. This is a direct violation of the Third Commandment; it is a wrongful use of the name of Yahweh; it is to take the name of Yahweh in vain. We should not summon God to bless what we are doing; rather, we should seek to do what God is blessing. Instead of proclaiming “God bless America,” we should be practicing “America obey God.”

I realize that in some contexts the expression “God bless America” conveys a sense of thankfulness for all the blessings that God has bountifully bestowed on our country. This is *not* what I am talking about. *I am talking about using the presence and power of God—using the name of God—as an instrument for any cause other than the cause of the Kingdom of God.* To do so is to make wrongful use of the name of Yahweh our God. Yahweh is not an American, and our nation has not been blessed because it is more righteous than any other nation. To think otherwise is blasphemy.

Blasphemy is not only when a National Endowment for the Arts subsidizes an artist who drops a crucifix in a jar of urine, but also when German soldiers marched off to World War II bearing “*Gott mit Uns*” (“God with Us”) on their uniforms. That was blasphemy, taking the LORD’s name in vain, attempting to drag God’s good name through the mud of our sin. Not much less blasphemous was George Bush asking for a prayer in our behalf before we bombed Iraq.

The LORD's reputation must be protected. A central concern of God in Exodus is "that My name may be declared throughout all the earth" (9:16). At stake for God is the declaration of His name to the world and the effect the hearing of that name will have on people. Will they be drawn to it or repelled by it or remain indifferent to it? The divine name must not be used in any way that brings disgrace to God or to God's purposes for the world. Whether by words or deeds or both, anyone who gives Yahweh "a bad name" will answer to the God they have insulted. *The use of the name of God is, above all else, a matter of mission: we must use the name of God so as to bring glory to Him and to His work in this world.*

God revealed His name to Moses in order that Israel would be able to address God but not possess God. His very name means, "I will be whoever I will be." And the day is coming in which absolutely everyone will realize this. In the words of the Apostle Paul:

Therefore God exalted him [Christ Jesus] to the highest place and gave him the **name** that is above every **name**, that at the **name** of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is **Lord**, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:9-11, NIV).

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