



Please don't call me Reverend

Titles are meaningless in the church

Sooner or later Christians are going to have to face this business of titles.

Either we are a family—or we're not. As a family we call each other by our first names. Peter. John. Stephen. Paul.

But if we're not a family, only an organization, then it's wise to hold on to—and confer—titles. For titles mean security. They denote rank. We can hide our inabilities behind them.

All the men in the Buckingham family have some kind of earned title. My older brother is an army general. My younger brother is a medical doctor.

That makes me look pretty plain when my name appears along with theirs. The temptation, then, on the part of news reporters (and mothers) is to dress me up a little.

The quickest way to instant dignity is to confer a title. Such as "Reverend."

But there is a distinct difference between titles earned and titles bestowed. Generals and doctors earn their titles.

But reverends?

It seems the Spirit of the Man of Galilee was never concerned about titles, proper recognitions, or even "self-rights." Others referred to him as Rabbi, Teacher, or Master—but his favorite term for describing himself was simply "Son of Man."

Actually there is but one place in the entire Bible where the term "Reverend" is used, and that is in reference to God Himself: "Holy and reverend is HIS name." (Ps 111:9). As such, it has always seemed slightly presumptuous for me to try to share the glory with Him.

I come from a title-oriented family. My maternal grandfather was a "Kentucky Colonel"—back before the term was bastardized by the fried chicken people. I never knew him as anyone but Col. Thompson.

Thus when I graduated from seminary—the only male member of our immediate family without an earned doctor's degree or military rank—my mother's side of the family immediately began writing me as Reverend Buckingham.

I wrote back and asked not to be addressed that way. Why not just call me by my name, the way they always had. After all, I was not only their cousin and nephew, I was their brother in Christ.

Shortly after they started addressing my mail to "Bro. Jamie Buckingham."

The problem, of course, is not with those

around us. It lies inside us. Especially with those in positions of leadership.

A friend recently introduced me to her fiancée, a shy young man who had just been ordained into the Episcopal priesthood. "Jamie, this is Father Johnson."

Why, I asked myself, was she free to call me by my first name, but felt compelled to refer to her fiancée as "Father?" Granted, my children—and more often my wife—call me "Daddy." But that's a title earned—not one conferred.

Clergymen, who should be the most secure people on earth, seem to be more title conscious than any others. I know a minister who never calls his wife anything but "Sister Wilson" in public. Now that really stimulates my imagination as I think of how their pillow talk must go.

"Good night, Sister Wilson."

"Sweet dreams, Reverend dear."

Actually the term "reverend" means "worthy of reverence." It referred to an exalted office in the church, much as judges on the bench are called "your honor." However, as the separation between clergy and laity (a concept entirely foreign to the New Testament) became more distinct, titles were used to designate ascending functionaries. "The Reverend." "The Most Reverend." "The Most Holy Reverend."

When the title-conscious functionaries of the Sanhedrin insisted on titling Jesus, He said simply, "Call Me son of man." It was His way of saying, you are the ones who need titles, not me.

Military experts know there is a vast difference between a command position and a commander. Many men are promoted into command positions. They have authority because it is conferred upon them. Others are commanders. They have authority because they are leaders. Such men do not need bars and stars. Men follow them regardless, for they recognize their leadership.

So it was with Jesus.

So it should be with us.

The New Testament teaches the priesthood of *all* believers, not just those who are ordained as "men of the cloth." Therefore, unless we want to widen the rift between believers in the Body of Christ, I strongly recommend we forever omit any title—Reverend, Pastor, Father, etc.—that tends to describe one man as holier than another or even better than another.

Many of our finer colleges and universities, along with some seminaries, now make it a practice to call everybody from the president down (or is it up) by the title "Mister."

Especially should this be true for those with honorary degrees.

"There was a young pastor named Tweedle

Who refused to accept his degree.

It was bad enough being Tweedle,
Without being Tweedle, D.D."

I have problems, even in my imagination, picturing those early Christians addressing their elder as "Reverend Timothy." Somehow it seems out of character to imagine the Reverend Bartholomew announcing a meeting in the catacombs, saying "The most holy Reverend James the Just will speak following the burnings in the colosseum."

Those men and women were too busy preaching the gospel—and trying to stay alive—to worry about conferring and receiving titles.

As Vance Havner used to say: It doesn't do any good to stick a label on an empty bottle.

A minister friend in the mid-west, who has heard me expound on this subject, disagrees. "Titles are the last line of defense between the shepherd and the sheep," he says. "If a man in the congregation begins to feel he can call me by my first name, then he will soon begin to feel he knows as much about the Kingdom as I do. From there it is but one step until I am replaced."

And so you have it. But can you picture such a man with a towel across his arm, kneeling in front of his friends, washing their feet? Only those with great authority are secure enough to wash feet. And such authority is never bestowed—it is merely recognized. And does not need a title to make it real.

The pattern of the New Testament is to call one another by first name. It is the pattern of the family.

Granted, my father held special position in our family. While others called him by his first name, none of his children ever addressed him as such.

But the title we conferred on him was not one of rank. It was one of endearment. Daddy.

So let it be in the Kingdom as well. ↵