

# THE LAST WORD

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**Jamie Buckingham**

*Pastor, Parson, Brother, Friend;  
But please don't call me Reverend.*

My younger brother is a medical doctor and my older brother a brigadier general in the army. Thus when our names appear together, there is always the temptation to try to dress me up a little so I won't look so plain. And one of the quickest ways of dignifying me is to tack on the term "reverend."

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

One of the modern-day security blankets we status-hungry professionals use is the printing of titles before our names. This makes us seem important even though we are still clods.

Yet it seems to me that 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).

When I graduated from seminary and was called as pastor of a large church, my mother got quite excited and started addressing me as reverend. (God bless mothers!) I was horrified and wrote her to please not use that unscriptural term on her envelopes. She wrote back asking how she should address me now that I had such an important position. I suggested that for her the term "son" was still appropriate, although some of my flock called me "brother." Convinced I

needed some kind of title to feed my ego and bolster my security among mailmen, and unable to address a letter using "son," she addressed all my correspondence for the next year to "Bro. Jamie Buckingham."

(Don't think I'm absurd. I still know some clergymen who introduce themselves over the phone by saying, "This is Reverend White," and a few less-pious ones who say, "This is Brother Black." Some are so hung up on titles that they even stick them on their wives. "This is my wife, Sister Brown." I've often wondered if these titles are used in the bedroom. "Good night, Sister Brown." ("Sweet dreams, Reverend.")

Actually the term "reverend" means "worthy of reverence." Originally it referred to an exalted office in the church, much as judges on the bench are called "Your Honor." However, as the separation between the "clergy" and "laity" became more distinct, titles were used to designate who was who.

The New Testament teaches the priesthood of *all* believers, not just the ordained ones. Peter says all Christians are part of the holy priesthood (I Pet. 2:5). Therefore, unless we want to widen the rift between believers in the Body of Christ, I strongly recommend we omit any title that tends to describe one man as holier than another — especially the term reverend.

Many of our finer colleges and universities, along with most seminaries, make it a practice to call everybody from the president down (or up) by the title "mister." This is a far more dignified designation than any other highfalutin title, either earned or honorary. Remember the jingle:

There was a young pastor named  
Tweedle  
Who refused to accept his degree.  
It's bad enough being Tweedle  
Without being Tweedle, D. D.

Use of a title such as reverend may at times bring special favors, just as a clergy tag (ugh!) on the back of an automobile might get a discount from the local mechanic. But usurping a title that should be reserved for God just to bloat one's ego or rate a discount is dangerously close to blasphemy. One anonymous poet put it this way:

There is a certain fellow  
Who makes me want to burst.  
He never fails to hail me  
With "Hello, Reverend Hurst."

If two things make bad syntax  
This one is the first  
When some guy introduces me  
With "This is Reverend Hurst."

As just a common "Mister"  
I'd acknowledge him to durst;  
But I would like to punch the man  
Who calls me "Reverend Hurst."

Anyway, the term "reverend" is an adjective, and an adjective I am not. I'm not even a past participle. I'm a noun. If I want an adjective, I'll pick one to suit my character, such as "happy," or "joyful."

Actually, the only two adjectives we can apply to ministers with any degree of grammatical correctness are "the venerable" and "the late." And I have yet to hear someone say "Venerable Smith" or "Late Jones."

Can you imagine those early Christians speaking of their elder as "Reverend Timothy"? Or of those early disciples of Christ addressing one another at their ministerial meetings as "the Reverend Bartholomew" or "the Most Holy Reverend James the Just"? Or perhaps the Philippian jailer entering the cellblock and calling out to Silas, "Hi there, Rev.?"

The New Testament warrant is for us to be called by our first names. But, if you insist on hanging a title on me, just call me mister. (That is unless you are determined to be scriptural, in which case you may address me as St. Jamie.)