

Divine names and *Relentless*

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### Divine Names and *Relentless*

I decided to write this letter after a son saw a video called *Relentless* by John Bevere. My son asked me whether we may call ourselves “Christ” because we are His followers. I bought the Kindle version of John Bevere’s (2011) book, *Relentless*, and reviewed its contents. I originally intended to comment on several exegetical and theological errors, but, in the interest of brevity, I decided to confront the most serious issue raised in the book – misuse of divine names. In this paper, I discuss the misuse of divine names in the book and scriptures that allegedly support the misuse of divine names.

Before critiquing the work, this paper outlines the contention that attracts the interest of this writing. Bevere (2011) argues that the follower can be referred to as “Christ” because of the follower’s association with Christ. Bevere argues, after citing Philippians 2.7, that Jesus “set aside” His deity when He came to earth. Then, he refers to Paul’s body metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12, arguing that membership in Christ’s body makes the Christian so united with Christ that we can reasonably refer to the follower of Christ as “Christ.” Bevere refers to his own body and others’ response to sight of his body – when others see his body, they see him. He continues his argument by briefly referring to several scriptures that purportedly support his contention that one can refer to a Christian as “Christ.”

This review of the use of divine names in *Relentless* must begin with the Bible as the basis of evaluation of the text. The Old Testament reserves divine names for Yahweh Himself. In the Ten Commandments, the basis of all Pentateuchal legislation, Yahweh commands through Moses: “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain” (Exodus 20:7, NASB). The use of the name of Yahweh must be in accordance with the usage of which He approves. Otherwise, in the misuse

of the divine name, Yahweh finds the offender guilty. Later in the Pentateuch, we find an example of misuse of the Name. We read of a struggle between two men in the Israelite camp. One party, a son of an Egyptian father and Israelite mother, blasphemes the Name and curses. Moses detains the blasphemer until the Lord commands the offender be stoned to death (Leviticus 24:11). The name of Yahweh is holy, so that a blasphemous utterance, even in a struggle, requires the offender to face death. Disobedience to the divine commands shows no fear for “this glorious and awesome name, the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 28:58).

The New Testament writers also refer to Jesus with divine names. They ascribe Old Testament statements about Yahweh to Jesus. For example, John refers to Jesus when he quotes Isaiah’s prophecy (Isaiah 40.3): “For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight!’” (Matthew 3.3, NASB). The Hebrew writer also ascribes divine names to Jesus. He calls Jesus the “radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature.” In comparing Jesus with angels, he notes that “He has inherited a more excellent name than they.” He even calls Jesus “Son” and addresses the Son as “O God.” In addition, the writer recognizes Jesus as the Creator of the universe: “You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, And the heavens are the works of Your hands.” Jesus is not only attributed with the creation of the world, but also with immortality. Jesus, as the Lord, remains, even when the earth and heavens end. Jesus, this Lord, is “the same and his years will not come to an end” (Hebrews 1.3, 5, 8, 10-12). In addition, what we call Jesus is important to how we think about Him. He asked His disciples: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” After listening to them name several prophets, He asks them for their viewpoint of His identity:

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 16.16-17, NASB)

The title Christ is more than just a name. It refers to the Messiah, the Anointed One (BAGD, 2000). Jesus is the only One whom we can call Christ because of the unique position He plays in salvation history. Simon identified the Messiah, the Christ, because the father revealed this truth. Incidentally, Jesus called Simon’s name Peter. The Lord should have commemorated the confession by proclaiming that Simon should be called “Christ,” if Bevere’s contention were true. Other New Testament authors also use the name of Christ in conjunction with work that only deity can perform. One example of this usage is found in the first chapter of Paul’s Ephesian letter.

The restrictions placed on the use of the Name may sound strange to modern ears. Many of us hear frequent misuse of God’s name and may regard such misuse as minor as compared with other maladies that we face. However, consideration of the use of words can clarify the significance of the divine names. Human thought is composed of words. We assign meaning and interpret reality with the words we use. If God is transcendent and eternal in all His being, then our conception of His reality must use terms to signify that He resides in an infinitely higher status as compared with us, His creatures. Consequently, we must select and reserve words that uniquely represent His character and nature, so that we represent an interpretation of reality that recognizes His transcendence. Thus, use of trite, vulgar, or even common words to describe the God who is transcendent demeans His nature in our understanding. Similarly, use of divine names for humans exalts the humans (in their own understanding) to a position they do not deserve.

In the context of the Biblical injunctions concerning divine names, we will consider Bevere's reference to scriptures that purportedly support his contention about ascribing a divine name to man. Bevere refers to Christians in terms that the scriptures do not authorize. In this case, the name of Christ is attributed to humans. He justifies his terminology by referring to Paul's use of metaphors and his interpretation of God's indwelling the Christian. Paul, in his use of the body as a metaphor for relationships among Christians, focuses on the need for every part of the body, even if one does not have a more presentable place in the body. In this vein, Bevere contends that membership in the body means that the individual member is Christ himself. Taken to its logical conclusion, one member of the body becomes the whole body. Thus, his contention assumes that the part is the whole, stretching the metaphor beyond its intended applicability.

Moreover, Bevere appeals to several scriptures to support his use of divine names in reference to humans. As he pens: "So when you read *Christ* in the New Testament, you need to see not just the One who died on the cross but also yourself" (Bevere, 2011). As justification for this assertion, he cites Hebrews 2.11: "For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all of one." His assertion, however, neglects the context. The Hebrew writer recognizes that Jesus became a little lower than the angels to taste death for everyone. After citing Old Testament passages, he concludes: "Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil ..." (Hebrews 2.14, NASB). Thus, the brotherhood between Jesus and man occurs because Jesus became a man, not because man becomes Christ.

Next, Bevere appeals to verses from Jesus' high priestly prayer recorded in John 17. "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that

they may all be one; even as You, Father, *are* in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me” (John 17:20-21, NASB). Again, Bevere comments: “You are one with Jesus. Literally one.” Jesus speaks of “they are one,” referring to fellow believers, not the Son and the believer. Moreover, Jesus refers to the oneness between His Father and Him. Jesus is not the Father, though he is one with Him. In the same way, a Christian’s oneness with Christ does not mean transfer divinity or the right to be called a divine name. These verses do not support the reference to believers as Christ, as Bevere purports.

Further, Bevere’s writing appeals to 2 Peter 1:4: “For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of *the* divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.” Again, this verse is used to argue that, if Christians partake of divine nature, then they should be called Christ. Referring to the Greek text gives a nuance of the word that is translated “partakers” and that is not as apparent in the English text. The word “partakers” is a translation of the Greek word κοινωνός (transliterated koinonos) and lies in the semantic domain of sharer or companion (BAGD, 2000). Sharing or partaking, however, does not necessarily mean that the Christians become divine. Let me illustrate with a common event. Suppose I donate a liter of my blood that is eventually used in a surgery. The recipient received the blood that I shared and has the blood within him/her. However, that recipient does not become me. In the same way, our sharing or partaking of divine nature means that, after escaping lustful corruption of the world, we have received precious and magnificent promises that have resulted in our sharing in his divine essence or nature, not becoming divine.

Further, another purported supporting passage is 1 John 4.17. Starting with the previous verse, John pens: “We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God

is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world” (1 John 4.16-17, NASB). Again, Bevere appeals to this verse to equate the follower with being called “Christ.” Instead of teaching about divine names ascribed to humans, John appears to give a basis for confidence on the judgment day. In this passage, the person who abides in the sphere of love experiences God’s indwelling and personal abiding in God, so that the perfected love brings about confidence before God in His eschatological judgment. Then, John gives a reason for this confidence – we are like Him in this present life. In what way, are we, the followers of Christ, like Jesus? Judging from the context, when we love, we are like Him. The passage, then, does not give reason for the deification of followers; rather, it serves to edify the believer to love because God’s nature as shown in Jesus, the exalted God and second member of the trinity, is love.

Part of the interpretive problem in this verse stems from the comparative adverb in verse 17. The words “just as” serve to compare “that person,” as the Greek text relates, and “we.” Bevere assumes that the comparison includes all characteristics of “That person” and “we.” Thus, everything about the previous must be true of the latter. However, such an assumption about the comparative adverb of “just as” is simply not true. Several uses of the word prove otherwise. The comparison of two items may be limited to one or a few characteristics. For example, in Luke 11.30, Jesus compares Himself with Jonah – as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so the Son of Man is to the present generation. Jesus specifies the point of comparison – the sign of Jonah will be the sign given to this generation. Jesus also compares the days of Noah with the days of the Son of Man (Luke 17.26) and then lists the points of comparison. He is comparing specified actions of the people of Noah’s day with the actions of

people in Jesus' day. In these cases, the Ninevites did not become the people of Jesus' day neither did the people of Noah's day become identical with the people of the Lord's day, even when certain attributes were compared.

In addition, Bevere seeks support from 1 Corinthians 6.15. Paul pens, "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be!" (NASB). Paul argues that his readers should not fornicate because their bodies belong to the Lord. The argument of the body metaphor from 1 Corinthians 12 applies here – a part does not comprise the whole. If the passage confronts the use of a physical body for sexual immorality, then how does this support referring to the Christian as Christ? Is not the focus of the passage the forbidding of fornication on the basis of Christ's ownership of His followers and their bodies?

Prior to discussion of ascribing a divine name to the follower, Bevere comments that Christ "set aside" His deity. The authority that Bevere believes was lost because of Adam's sin was restored in Jesus becoming a man. Bevere continues:

A man lost it, so a Man would have to restore it. This is why Jesus had to come as the "Son of Man." He was born of a woman, making him 100 percent man. He was fathered by the Holy Spirit, making Him 100 percent God (and thus free from the curse of sin). However, we are clearly told that "When the time came, he [Jesus] set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human!" (Philippians 2:7, MSG). Even though He is God, He set aside His deity and walked the earth as a man.

The placement of this statement about relinquishing of deity just prior to the discussion of the use of Christ as a name for His followers may imply the author's belief that the two concepts are related. That is, the follower of Christ can be referred to as Christ on this earth because Christ set aside His deity, thus making Himself a man like us. Though the change in topics does not include a transition paragraph that clarifies the relationship between the two concepts, the juxtaposition of the two concepts is suggestive of such an interpretation.

Curiously, Bevere contradicts himself at this point. He declares that Christ is 100 percent God and 100 percent man. Then, however, he asserts that Christ set aside his deity. How can He set aside His deity, yet be 100 percent God? These concepts are mutually exclusive. Jesus cannot have set aside His deity and remained 100 percent God.

Bevere's statement about "setting aside His deity" is strictly wrong and finds no support in the scripture to which he refers. In regard to the Philippians passage, Bevere quotes: "He set aside the privileges of deity." His interpretation of the passage does not take into account the clear message of the verse. Setting aside the privileges of deity is quite different than setting aside deity itself. Suppose, for example, that I, a United States citizen, travel to a foreign country to transact business in the name of the US with protection and authority to perform that work. However, I may choose not to invoke the authority granted to one of my position. For instance, instead of sleeping in the best of hotels, I may choose to sleep on the streets or in a homeless shelter. Even though I may give up my privilege to stay in expensive accommodations, I am still a US citizen and able to carry out the business for which I came. Similarly, Jesus became a man on earth to carry out His father's business, but did not invoke divine privilege, except as His Father willed (John 6.38).

The Biblical witness also attests that Jesus retained His deity during his ministry among men. John's gospel declares: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God .... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth ... No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him*" (John 1.1, 14, 18, NASB). This Word is God, yet is different in personality from God the Father. This Word became flesh and took up residence

among man. The text relates that the Word retained His Nature (He was still the Word) when He entered the world and does not even hint at any change in His divinity when He became a man. In addition, Paul contended: "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Colossians 2.9, NASB).

In summary, Bevere's contention that the followers of Christ may be referred to as Christ receives no support from the scripture. Paul's use of the body as a metaphor does not support Bevere's contention. Neither do the scriptural references provided as additional support. The scripture maintains that divine names are holy and are only used of the One who is worthy to bear such a name. The scripture also presents the Son of God as retaining His deity while dwelling among men.

The error of ascribing man with divine names is worse than other teaching errors. This error disregards the basis of all Torah, that is, the Ten Commandments. It dishonors the holy Name and attempts to exalt man to a status he does not deserve.

I never thought I would be forced to confront the issue of misuse of a divine name by an Evangelical church. The holiness of God's name should be basic to all Christian teaching. How was such a basic error overlooked? I assume that the leadership reviewed Bevere's writings and video before allowing the church to view it. Could it be that the reviewers did not have the background in exegesis and theology critically to evaluate the work in question? Or did the fact that the speaker is very popular overshadow the shortcomings of his theology? Regardless of the reason, vulnerable people watched the video and were taught false doctrine. A person who teaches that Jesus set aside His deity when he became man and that divine names can be ascribed to man taught a youth group and adults. Many of these listeners are likely not to have adequate background to discern truth from error. James' warning becomes very important in view of this

issue: “Let not many *of you* become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment” (James 3.1, NASB). This admonition appears to limit the number of teachers because of the higher standard to which God holds teachers, regardless of their popularity or background.

Several recommendations are crucial at this juncture. Sound teaching about the theology of deity is necessary. Surely, the Assemblies of God have professors who are knowledgeable about the trinity, divine names, and the nature of the Son of God. Moreover, any minister must be very familiar with the Biblical languages and the respective exegetical methods. The Assemblies of God should require every minister to take Greek and Hebrew classes and to demonstrate competency in exegesis and methods of explicating the findings.

## References

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