

In the Lord's Name: *The Power and Peril of the Third Commandment* | BY LOREN SEIBOLD

When I was a child, my family was on a party line. That meant that there were five or six families using the same telephone line. We knew most of them.

My grandparents lived on the next farm, and they were on it, as well as my aunt and uncle a couple of miles the other way. It worked pretty well most of the time. You listened for your own ring (a long and a short) and then picked up the receiver. Sometimes you picked up to make a call when someone else was already talking. If you were really quiet, you could listen in.

One of our party-liners was John Gomke. I never met him, but his phone conversations were legendary. He had the worst language we had ever heard. My mother prohibited us from listening to him, although sometimes we did. He was marvelously inventive in his profanity, and a Jedi master of scatology.

Having attended public school, I did not find phrases like "God damn" new, but it wasn't what I heard at home. My father got angry, but I never heard him curse, not even when he dropped a tractor battery on his toe. With the exception of my years at an Adventist boarding academy (more than a little irony there, I know), I've kept my language within respectable bounds, avoiding what Chesterton called "the use of theological terms to which [one attaches] no doctrinal significance."¹

Still, I'm not sure how deeply I feel about it. If I were witness to a robbery, I hope I would have the courage to intervene. I wouldn't, though, march over to a stranger in a restaurant and tell him to watch his mouth, as I've heard sanctimonious Christians boast of doing. You may blame it on cowardice, apathy, or even a jaded dissipation, but I don't find garden-variety profanity as pressing an issue as, say, war. I'm not saying it's nice. It is crude and boorish and disrespectful. I would punish my children, had I any,

for speaking that way. It is what people like John Gomke do. (Or *did*, since John has kicked the bucket, leaving the world marginally more courteous.)

But I just can't believe that John Gomke and his brother idiots are the primary target of the Third Commandment. It is disrespectful to use God's name in a vulgar way, to be sure.² I wouldn't argue that commandment is without implications concerning the diminishment of the Divine name. But that doesn't seem to be quite enough freight for a genuine, full-fledged commandment to carry.³ There's a weight in what the rest of the commandments prohibit or encourage that the third one seems to lack if it were meant only to scold drunks and fools. It's using a shotgun to kill flies.

An Overlooked Commandment

I asked my congregation one Sabbath which of the commandments they would rate as the least understood. A Seventh-day Adventist group naturally selects the Fourth. Of course, it deserves consideration for the title. Most Christians, if they reference it at all, have discounted the *chronos* element in favor of the *kairos*: it is *a* time for worship that gets consideration, not *the* time. Even when they round it down to some bit of public worship once every seven days, few find value in those riders about not working and not doing your own pleasure. Still, I'm not convinced that other Christians flat out misunderstand it. They know what it means. They just don't think it's important.

The Third Commandment, however, is hardly understood at all. I'm being only slightly facetious when I say that for us Seventh-day Adventists it may be that the light that shines from the Fourth Commandment has obscured the Third Commandment.⁴ The Third Commandment slouches there, slightly hazy, in the shadow of its more

exalted sibling. The First and Second Commandments, not to worship other gods, nor to represent God—those we get. By the time we reach the Third Commandment, though, we're hardly paying attention because our eyes are on that beacon at the peak of the law: the Sabbath, so neglected and maligned.

I suspect that the real meaning of this commandment was lost along with its context, and so its requirements devolved upon thoughtless profanity. The key understanding (the one that should alter our understanding of it) is that it is a command against intentionally abusing the *power* of the name. That application should hit us churchy people squarely between the eyes. When I look at the problems that the conservative wing of the Christian church (which here and there, now and then, includes us) has most struggled with, I begin to feel there may be something in that Third Commandment that we should be attending to.

Name Power

We live in a time of casual name-knowing. As he gives us menus, our nineteen-year-old waiter tells us his name is Derek, and he'll be taking care of us tonight. My physician calls me by my first name, even though I have as much education as he does and senior him by ten years. Fewer and fewer call me "pastor," and if someone addressed me as "mister," I'd wonder if I were about to be arrested. I blame James Earl Carter, Jr., who in 1976 took on the Library of Congress, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the staid BBC, and several state secretaries of state preparing presidential election ballots to win the right to be denominated by the hypocorism "Jimmy." Or maybe "Jimmy" was merely a symptom of America's long pretense that we're all the same, as when a billionaire makes an affectation of good ol' boyism by introducing himself as "Bill."

In any case, it has been a long time since a name (especially a first name) was something of value, shared only by formal introduction. Derek doesn't seem at all concerned about my knowing his first name though we are utter strangers, and would unhesitatingly call me by mine if he knew it. Furthermore, English grammar makes no distinction between the respectful address and the familiar; even God has to share pronouns with the rest of us.

In earlier times, to know and use someone's name was a privilege—one carefully granted, because the resulting familiarity was a vulnerability. Even today, using another's familiar name borrows a bit of his power: if I drop your

name in conversation, people might think me a dearer confederate of yours than I actually am, making your name the passport to something I want.

Which brings us to oaths. An oath calls upon something or someone that both speaker and listeners consider sacred, as a witness that what is spoken is binding.⁵ In a world lacking effective legal enforcement, a merchant might take an oath to firm up a deal: "I swear by the name of the Almighty God that I'll pay you back with interest within thirty days, and may God strike me dead if I don't." Matthew 5:33–37, is meant to prop up the Third Commandment against such abuses: "You have heard it said that you ought to act honorably on your oaths," Jesus says. "I'm telling you, don't make oaths at all," because you have neither ability nor consistency to act in the name of the all powerful, always consistent God. Jesus surely wouldn't like vulgar language, but here he's addressing fallible human beings taking advantage of the *authority* of the name of infallible God.

Utility

God's name carried power in the same way that an idol did: as something representing God that a human being could employ for his own ends. In summary, the sin of the Third Commandment is in finding God's name *useful*—a tool for trade in wealth, power, or influence. The vulgar use of the name (the only interpretation we offer our children) is a footnote to this bigger understanding. (Conveniently, cursing isn't much of a temptation to us, so this interpretation has the added advantage of making the Third Commandment more or less a "gimme".)

The adjectival "God damn," as an example, evolved from an oath. A very angry person might say, "I call upon God to damn you to hell for what you've done to me." In a culture still invested in the power of sacred words, that would have been terrifying. Imagine it said by a fat, powerful priest to a superstitious peasant; the suggestion alone may have been enough to make the peasant curl up and die.

We no longer fear word formulas; rational Protestantism has freed us from the heebie jeebies. Should you damn me in God's name, I would think you a jerk, but I could still enjoy the meal Derek brings me. In general, we no longer value sacred things at the component level. Crosses and crucifixes are merely jewelry; churches are multipurpose halls; Bibles lost their dignity when they turned from leather-bound books into software; the bread

and wine are just object lessons. I'm reluctant to opine whether or not this is all just as well.

But I'm pretty sure of this: there is still such a thing as sacred power, and it is not wielded by cursing drunks. The danger of one's misusing sacred power (and therefore breaking the Third Commandment) increases with one's claims to piety. That makes it a particular danger to those of us who work in the Church. When I preach, I gain my authority from sacred power. When I ask people to give money to the Church, I do it in the name of things sacred. Counseling, board meetings, pastoral visits, organizing of church officers and volunteers—all of them depend upon the listeners' belief that the leader is in some way, even if loosely, speaking for God.

We ought to (though scarcely any of us do) wrestle this alligator at every turn of the religious life. Faith is, by its nature, a sort of posturing, an acting as if that which I affirm is God's will, too. When I pray for a patient in the hospital, my prayer assumes that God prefers the patient recover. Whether God's will lines up with the patient's and mine is quite beyond our knowing. Even if I understand that, does the patient? Yet if I qualify my prayer so thoroughly ("*Only* if it is *Thy* will, O Lord") that the prayee is certain of my uncertainty, then where is faith? Where is hope? And should God decide to take a pass on the opportunity I've given him to do a miracle, where is the psychological, possibly placebo, boost that my prayer might yet provide?

And so every religious transaction is a spiritual minefield. As a pastor—indeed, as a known Christian—I am called upon to speak for God, even while moment by moment on the razor's edge of misappropriating his authority. The only way to navigate such a field, it seems to me, is with more humility and tentativeness than most people like to see in a person of faith. That's probably why the worst Third Commandment offenses are by those who have largely dispensed with humility as an impediment to progress.

A televangelist says, "God has told me that if you send your money to me, he promises to give you ten times more."

A slimy investor says, "A handshake is as good as a contract between us brothers in Christ."

A priest says, "You can trust me to take your little boy camping."

It is no wonder that a public flouting of the Third Commandment was the only occasion upon which Jesus lost his cool (Matt. 21:12).

Too Near the Edge

Not long ago, I received by mail a sort of Christian Yellow Pages, a directory of Christian-identified businesses. At first, I thought it a clever idea. Then I got to thinking about the number of deals that go bad. The number of businessmen who simply aren't honest no matter how often they go to church. The inevitable misunderstandings even when all parties are well-intentioned Christian people. The Christian business directory is a whole book of potential Third Commandment pitfalls, and I think that if I were a Christian businessman I would refuse to put my name in it.



I have seen us skirt the same line in my denomination. An elderly couple, perhaps under the influence of a convincing conference trust director, wills a substantial gift to the Church. They may just have a sincere desire to see God's work go forward. But I have met those I suspected of thinking, "God will save me more readily if I leave my money to the Church." It is impossible to know another's motives with certainty, but it is worth wondering about. Would we turn down the end-of-life gift of one who we suspected of believing he is making amends for a shaky spiritual life?

I get concerned whenever I hear Malachi 3:10, quoted over an offering.⁶ I've met Christians who take it to mean that God is going to enrich me as I enrich the church—a sort of Reverend Ike lite.⁷ In fact, the blessing that is poured out to you when you give money to the

church school may be the satisfaction of seeing children go to school. The blessing of paying tithe may be the satisfaction of seeing your world church thrive. Again, it is impossible to judge your motives in giving. Nor do I doubt Malachi's promise. But I hope that we representatives of the Church don't give you false expectations in God's name.

As a believer in inspiration, I don't consider it my task to say that Ellen White's statement that the General Conference is "the highest authority that God has upon the earth" is untrue.⁸ Yet I cannot for the life of me see how it can be quoted authoritatively without trespassing on God's authority. The most likely reason for bringing it up is to convince church members to give church leaders more authority than they may feel inclined to. Who of us in church leadership could ever be sufficiently disinterested in our own authority to say it? So whether or not it is true, it isn't very serviceable if you are aware of God's eye upon you.

The president of the United States told a group of Palestinian leaders in 2003, "I'm driven with a mission from God. God would tell me, 'George, go and fight those terrorists in Afghanistan.' And I did, and then God would tell me, 'George go and end the tyranny in Iraq,' and I did."⁹ Here he steps not only near, but off the precipice of the Third Commandment. A president may have good reasons to go to war, and I will listen to them. But to say that God has led him to it is a high-smelling hubris; this kind of thing has done more to drag God's good name in the mud than any number of greedy, horny, badly toupeed tele-evangelists.

It seems to me we can hardly be too careful about what we assert above God's signature. We Adventists have accepted the important assignment of defending God's Sabbath. But it has not been the breaking of the Sabbath that has created skeptics; it is the misuse of sacred authority that has brought too many thoughtful people to despise religion. It is the hucksterism of making dubious claims and demands in God's name. It is the kind of politics that calls upon God to witness for wars and inquisitions. It is preposterous pronouncements about what is in the mind of God by people who show little evidence of being his confidant. These are the sorts of things that led Steven Weinberg to say, "With or without [religion], you would have good people doing good things and evil

people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion."¹⁰

I only wish he weren't a little right. ■

Notes and References

1. From G. K. Chesterton's essay, "On Running after One's Hat."
2. Though if we want to be technical about it, *god* is a Germanic word for pagan deities, not a Hebrew name for the Only Genuine Deity in the universe. The Hebrew name for the One we call God the Father was written YHWH, which we pronounce Yahweh but the Jews refused to pronounce at all.
3. Actually, not killing people and not stealing from them is fairly low bar, too. A society where people just followed those rules to the letter would not necessarily be a happy one; you can still be angry and do lots of other nasty things. That may be why Jesus appended the Sermon on the Mount to the Torah, which not only sets the bar higher, but sets it higher than any of us can reach.
4. "Jesus raised the cover of the ark, and I beheld the tables of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written. I was amazed as I saw the fourth commandment in the very center of the ten precepts, with a soft halo of light encircling it." Ellen White, *Testimonies*, vol. 1, 75.
5. In English, we've muddled this concept, too: if someone utters an oath, we assume he's cursing.
6. "'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,' says the Lord Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.'"
7. The Right Rev. Dr. Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter II, media evangelist and advocate of the prosperity gospel, by which he himself proudly benefits. He tells his followers that sending their money to him will release them from bad habits of thinking ("thinkonomics") and allow them to become wealthy. He brags of his Rolls Royce fleet, jewelry, expensive suits, and mansions, purchased with their contributions, as evidence of God's blessing.
8. Ellen White, *Testimonies*, vol. 3, 492.
9. Former Palestinian foreign minister Nabil Shaath reported that President George W. Bush said this in a 2003 meeting that included Mahmoud Abbas, then Palestinian Authority president. It was confirmed by all present, and widely reported.
10. Steven Weinberg, *New York Times*, Apr. 20, 1999.

Loren Seibold is senior pastor of the Worthington, Ohio, Seventh-day Adventist Church.