

On Being Named
John 1:35-51
by Shane Lems

☞ Intro

“What’s in a name?” Names usually mean a lot, don’t they? We love naming our kids and our kids love naming their toys and animals. We have nicknames, middle names, and last names. Names are important. Naming self is what we do by nature. We don’t want our family names defamed; we want a good name. And so many today live their whole lives trying to find or make names for themselves. We all know of teenagers who crave attention and popularity so much that they get lost in alcohol, drugs, gangs, and so on. College kids want everyone to know their names. Amazingly, many people even Google their own names to see if they’re known or popular. Thousands of people want the name “American Idol.” This naming business can turn into a craving Babel-like lust; then it becomes sinful.

There are two ways to go about getting a name. You either can name yourself, or be named by another. In John’s language, you can either reject true testimony, or accept it and be named “child of God.” You might bend over backwards to gain fame and build a Babel-tower for yourself, so to speak, so that your name can go on it and endure. On the other hand, by grace, the other way, we receive a name by God. We’re in the middle of seeking a name for ourselves, and God comes down, strips us of our old name, and wraps us up in a new one. It’s called Baptism. It’s called conversion. In baptism we’re given the name, “Christian;” we’re set apart from the names of the world. When the Lord changes our hearts – before, during, or after baptism – the name becomes official. Our names then are written into God’s heavenly register, never to be forgotten.

Testimony. Christ. Seeing. Following. Finding. Naming. These things are what John speaks about in 1:35-51. John the Baptist gives testimony to Christ. Some receive the testimony, then see and follow Christ. Christ finds them and names them. It happened in the first century; it happens today. Christ is the Namer in this story. And this Namer is a Savior. Jesus has already been baptized at this point, and publicly received his name: My beloved Son, my Pleasure (Matt. 3.17). His name is now public testimony: he now turns and names his people, his disciples. This is part of Jesus’ mission, a name investiture.

☞ Day One: John the Baptist’s Public Testimony

Before Jesus starts naming his disciples, John the Baptist takes the stand and testifies: Jesus is the Lamb of God! Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! John declares Jesus’ name to his disciples: Lamb of God. Remember the verses before: law came through Moses, but grace and truth come through Christ. Moses can’t save; Jesus can and does. Moses can only give you the name Pharisee: Jesus gives the name “Saved-by-Grace.” And this salvation by grace comes through blood, as the Baptist hints at. Jesus is that OT Lamb who was slain as a substitute for the people – sin must be dealt with, after all. The forgiveness of sins is the center of John’s legal and public testimony, and the center of the Christian faith. Jesus forgives: there’s true testimony that saves, dear people of God. Jesus’ name Lamb of God is part of the legal process of name changing for Christians.

Notice too how the sound waves of John’s mouth effect something. That is, John’s five-word sermon in verse 36 is effective. Two of John’s disciples follow Christ because of John’s testimony. John pointed his finger, as Luther always said, at Jesus Christ. John the Baptist’s disciples go to where he points: the Lamb of God. Faith comes through hearing – the Baptist knew it! Faith comes through public testimony – John the Baptist knew it! This is why we preach so hard in Reformed churches. John the Baptist preached; we follow his and Paul’s method – we preach Christ, because the preaching-testimony to and of Jesus works! Jesus is the one we name in our preaching, we testify to the name of Christ in our preaching, just like John the Baptist.

When two of John’s disciples came to Jesus, he asked them, in a sort of ironic way, “Who are you seeking? Who are you looking for?” Of course Jesus knew! They answered him, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” Jesus invited them: “Come and you’ll see!” (v39). They called Jesus Rabbi, which the Evangelist reminds his readers means “teacher.” The Evangelist wants his written testimony to be clear, so he explains this name for his non-Jewish readers. When these two disciples asked Jesus, “Where are you staying,” they were simply saying, “We want to enroll in your school.” We know you’re a unique teacher – someone extraordinary – we want to follow you.

Jesus' "Come and you'll see" invitation is fulfilled later: "Everyone that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out" (Jn 6.37). Every name that the Father speaks to me will come to me, and I will write his name down, never to forget it. It's a naming process. The disciples will slowly learn this; they'll learn more of the name of Jesus and their own new names as well.

So the two did stay with Jesus. The 10th hour here is most likely 4pm; a time of day when starting a journey home would not be a good idea. After dark in those days, you did not travel for fear of robbers and bandits along the way. In the Greek, the term "abide" is used here (v39). The Evangelist uses "abide" here in a normal way; later, the followers of Christ learn its deeper significance. John later writes to the early disciple-church, "Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father" (1 Jn 2.24). They physically dwelled with Jesus that night – this was an introduction to the spiritual dwelling that John will later describe in depth, namely the eternal and eschatological dwelling of heaven. "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (Rev 21.3).

At some point, one of the two disciples named Andrew went to get his brother Simon. He said, "Simon – Simon, guess what! We have found the Messiah!" The Evangelist reminds us Gentile readers that the name Messiah means Christ, the anointed one. John the Baptist's testimony was effective: Andrew believed. But Andrew didn't keep quiet – he testified, or witnessed, to his brother Simon. The one testified to becomes a testifier, a witness. The Messiah is here! The müšî^âH of the Law and the Prophets is in our midst! Remember Hannah's prayer? She prayed thanks to Yahweh for an anointed one who has God-given power (1 Sam. 2.10). Remember Isaiah's prophecy of one who would be anointed (müšî^âH) with the Holy Spirit? He's here! Of course, Andrew would learn the deep significance of his rather elementary knowledge later, but he knew that something was going on, so he took Simon to Jesus (v42).

Jesus looked up from whatever he was doing and saw Peter coming to him. He reminds us – and Simon – that he was found by Jesus before he came. Jesus knew his name before a formal introduction. And now he's given a new name by Jesus. He's named by the Namer. Simon is named by Jesus. Simon is renamed by the Messiah. By gifting Simon with a new name – Peter or Cephas – he is giving Simon a whole new identity. Simon is now Peter. The old is gone, the new has come. A new world is made for Simon. He's given a new name like Abram, Sarai, and Jacob. He has a new story with a new beginning, an entirely new life. He will never again be his old self, Simon. His "this-worldly" story ends here. He is swept up onto the stage of Christ's drama and given a name: Christian.

Beloved, Jesus still gives new names today. In baptism, we're set apart and given the name of Christian. When God is pleased to convert and regenerate us, we're registered in God's book of life. We are "church-goers," named by the Lord of the church. This name does indeed sound strange to those who still try to name themselves. The worldly serpent laughs at us and tells us that his name for the fruit is much better. The construction workers at Babel still say, "Let's make a name for ourselves!" But praise God for our new names, and repent from trying to make a worldly name for yourself. After all, ultimately every "this-world name" is either "Babel" or "fool" (Gen 11.9 & Ps. 14.1). Christian, you don't define yourself! You don't write your own story! Jesus named you, and he doesn't forget those whom he names!

Look again at newly named Peter. Oh Peter, you who tried to stand between Christ and his cross, and received a momentary rebuke-name of "Satan" (Matt 16.23). Oh Peter, you who tried to rename yourself as you denied Jesus that dark night. Why did you say three times, "My name is not Peter, but Simon?" Oh Peter, you who Paul rebuked for treating Gentiles as second-rate Christians. Peter, you haven't lived up to your new name!

Shame not only on Peter but us. We have dragged our name, Christian, through the worldly mud time and again. We have said, even after we've professed faith in Christ, that we want a world-given name. We have said, "Jesus? I do not know him" as we ignored our neighbor in need, or cursed our enemy instead of blessed him. All of us build our little Babel-towers too often. Thou shalt not bear false witness! We do need to repent for sometimes stomping on our Jesus-given name, Christian.

But with Peter, despite all of our name hating, Jesus doesn't forget our name, nor does he trample it through the mud. When Peter was rejecting his name, Jesus was remembering it. Peter! Satan asked to sift you like wheat, but I have named you in heaven – I have prayed for you (Lk 22.31). I have not forgotten your name; I have named you before my Father. Your name has been heard in heaven, and will always be heard in heaven.

Your name is echoing off the walls of heaven. On earth as it is in heaven: Satan cannot touch you no matter how you deny your name and Namer. My naming is stronger than your denying!

The same Namer that prayed Peter into heaven – that bled and died so Peter could be named in heaven – names you into heaven, dear Christian. He had you in mind in his high priestly prayer, and your name was on his mind when he died on the cross. Now he ever lives to make intercession for you. This is huge: right now, Jesus is naming you to the Father. It's gospel. It's salvation. You'll never be sifted to hell, because Jesus has named you! This is what the fifth part of the Canons of Dort are talking about: preservation. Your name is known by the Father in heaven. Jesus prays for those named Christian.

Christianity is really all about learning what our new name means, isn't it? These disciples learned the significance of their new names as they grew older. Slowly they began to see who Jesus really was, especially after he burst the doors of hellish death as he rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven. Interestingly and significantly, Jesus is never called Rabbi after his resurrection – most likely because after that, they knew he was more than a rabbi. You'll learn slowly too. Just remember, that Jesus who named you won't forget your name. He won't deny you, because he is the faithful witness. He had your name in mind as he went to the cross, and he won't forget it as he sits on the right hand of the Father. You have been named by Christ – that's the gospel.

Before our eyes and ears John 1:11-12 is being fulfilled: some did receive Jesus, and to them he gave the right to be children of God, named by God. Look then at the next day.

☞ Day 2 Coming and Seeing

Verse 43 is the beginning of the next day. Jesus wanted to go to Galilee, but the Evangelist doesn't tell us whether or not Jesus arrived there when he found Phillip. Jesus seeks, finds, and tells Phillip to follow him. Two words that Jesus uttered were earth moving for Phillip. Follow me! Phillip does it, and since his life has been changed by two words of Jesus, he tells Nathaniel – actually he finds Nathaniel – and tells him about one named Jesus. Phillip was from Bethsaida, a little fishing town in the first century. Bethsaida was near the Sea of Galilee, so it is no surprise that fishing was part of every day life there. These disciples were just regular people, regular like you and me.

Back to Jesus' words: Follow me. Again, this testimony has power. Just a few words of divine testimony are effective. Isaiah told us as many as 700 years before the Evangelist wrote that the word of God does not return to him without doing something (55.11). The word succeeds here in drawing sheep to the Shepherd. The same voice that said, "Let there be" here says, "Follow me." Later this voice will work wonders: "Lazarus, come out!" Just by Jesus uttering Lazarus' name, Lazarus must stand up and breathe once again.

Phillip, now a follower of one named Jesus, names Jesus to Nathaniel. "We have found Jesus, son of Joseph, the One from Nazareth" (v45b). We have found the man that Moses and the Prophets named in the Scriptures, in the law and prophetic books. Remember all those words that tell us about a Messiah, a ruler, a King? He's here! Seriously! Even before these disciples had post-resurrection knowledge about Jesus, they understood that the Old Testament named Jesus so many years before their time. They knew that the Old Testament points to Jesus. They'll learn it more (read Peter's letters), but they know from the outset that the Scriptures are about Christ. The Evangelist as he writes this Gospel also knows as much, as we have seen in earlier verses, especially how the Word became flesh and tabernacled among people.

Nathaniel's answer to Phillip's remark is a bit cynical. Nazareth? Can anything good come from there? No Old Testament prophecies speak about Nazareth! Nazareth is not even on Old Testament Maps! I can't find Nazareth in an Old Testament word search! Are you bearing false witness, Phillip? Phillip's words echo Jesus' earlier: Come and see. If you don't believe my witness, come for yourself and see. John the Baptist witnessed, which turned Andrew into a witness. Then Peter followed. Now Phillip witnesses and Nathaniel follows. The name of Jesus is being proclaimed early on in John's Gospel.

Jesus then looked as he saw Nathaniel coming towards him (v47). Once again, before a formal introduction, Jesus knew what was going on. Jesus said, "You're a guile-free Israelite indeed." Nathaniel was confused. How did Jesus know who he was before he introduced himself? "How do you know me," he asked Jesus. Jesus answered well, "Before Phillip talked to you about me I saw you sitting under a fig tree." Of course, we know that Jesus knows what is "in man" (cf. 2.25). We remember how he talks to the women at the well and reminded her that she had five previous husbands (4.18). Jesus knows.

Jesus knows his people. Even when his people have not yet heard of him, or simply sinfully forget him, Jesus knows and remembers his people. Jesus knew his people when he went to the cross. He had their names on his mind, as it were. It is comforting for us to know that Jesus knows. Jesus does the seeking and saving, he is the Knower and Namer, despite our ignorance and denying. Dear Christian, your Savior always thinks about you, as mentioned earlier, he always prays your name to the Father, praying for your good and salvation.

That was all Nathaniel needed to hear. Jesus knew what he was doing before anyone told him. Rabbi! You are the Son of God, the King of Israel. Is he going a bit too far? Just because Jesus knew this Nathaniel makes a deeply significant statement. Jesus compelled Nathaniel on in his faith. You think that was a sign? You said that just because I knew you? I give legal testimony before God – Amen Amen, verily verily – you’ll see greater things. Truly truly, you’ll see heaven opening and angels going up and coming down on the Son of Man.

Only Jesus says these legal words of “Amen Amen.” It is an oath swearing word, Jesus gives binding assurance that it will happen. You think my knowledge is amazing, just wait until you come to know me by the name “Mediator.” The ladder that the Son of Man is brings us back to Genesis 28, where Jacob had a dream that he saw angels of God going up and coming down on a ladder. That night, Jacob also heard Yahweh speak words of assurance and peace to him: “I am your God...in you and your children all families on earth will be blessed...I am always with you.” Jacob interestingly named the place Beth-el, meaning House of God. Later Jacob is renamed according to this promise in Genesis 28: Israel.

The name Beth-el is a nickname for Jesus, so to speak. Beth-el directs our attention to the temple, the house of God, and the temple directs us to Jesus. In the next chapter, John 2, Jesus calls himself the temple. But here the Evangelist is giving us a preview. Jesus is the ladder between heaven and earth. Really, this verse screams out, “No more temple!” To meet with God, to get into God’s heavenly presence, you don’t need a temple any more, because the Son of Man is that way to God. Heaven is opened because of one named Jesus, the Son of Man. Jesus names himself the Son of Man, reminding us that Daniel’s name for Jesus was true. God will meet with his people in Christ. To get to God you have to know and trust Christ. If you try go access God apart from Christ, if you try to name God yourself, your ladder doesn’t go up, but down, and the bottom leads to destruction and hell, a Judas name, a name “God-hater” and “hated by God.”

Martin Luther said when commenting on this verse that in preaching, heaven is opened. Amen. We can’t physically go to Jesus like these early disciples, but we can still hear him in preaching. By God’s Spirit, when you hear the word preached – like “Follow me” – you hear Christ’s voice, and it is powerful to change hearts and save. Christ still names people today, remember that! When you hear the absolution every Lord’s Day, you’re reminded that your name is Christian if you repent and trust in the Namer. Jesus opens the door to heaven, and the open door means angels serve and help the church. Jesus opens the door to heaven, and that door will not close until every last one of God’s named children is safe in heaven. Then it will close, which means nothing but glory and joy for those named Christian.

✠ Conclusion

So we have seen the witness theme continue here in John. There’s not a court-like trial in this text, but there still is witness and testimony to and of Christ, even by him. In closing, I want you to note that even those who cautiously accept someone else’s testimony must also experience Jesus for themselves to be completely convinced. Hear this testimony from a later passage in John. I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life...the sheep follow him, for they know his voice (8.12 & 10.4).

Remember, a person needs the right Christology, the right doctrine of Christ, and faith in that testimony. You need to know who Jesus is and accept and believe it, and depend on him. You need to believe this testimony of who Jesus is and go see him for yourself, so to speak, along with these early disciples. You can’t just stay under that fig tree and say, “Sure, I believe Jesus is what the Bible teaches.” No, get up! Go find out if this testimony is true! This testimony may just knock you over though, I warn you. It may make you lose a name and get a new one. It may make you leave your fishing nets and fig trees and give you a whole new world. It may make people hate you, it may make your life more uncomfortable, but it will save you. Yes, you’ll get a new name, and remember that Jesus names his own – prays for his own – in the presence of God.

Jesus is the Namer. Jesus is the Savior. Jesus is the Mediator, the way to heaven, God’s presence. If you trust in his name, you get all wrapped up in a new name. To have Jesus name you is to get a heavenly name, a name that God sings over.