

What's in a Name?

In my previous article on Daniel 1, I concluded by sharing ways in which the culture around us can potentially influence us in negative ways. Cultural assimilation happens in a number of ways, including what we watch on the television week after week.

How many Christians have spent an inordinate amount of time watching shows that celebrate willful independence from God, shows that glorify living your life only for yourself, as well as shows that seek to take Christians away from God-honoring family relationships?

Many Christians who have been subtly — or not so subtly — absorbed into the culture will tell you that there's nothing wrong with what's sometimes called "casual" sex outside of biblical marriage between one man and one woman and other ways that we can sin with our bodies. We have to be careful of the shows we watch, the books we read, the music we listen to, and the friends who we allow to have an unhealthy and negative influence on our lives.

Let's go now from *assimilation* to *confusion*.

I want to focus now on the changing of these men's names. There's much more going on here than merely changing a name from Smith to Jones. We've talked about them a lot already, so let's take a moment and allow the text to introduce us to these four young men: "Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah." (Daniel 1:6)

At that time in redemptive history, names carried very important meanings. Important meanings that focus on God are not seen as common today as naming someone by a family name or a favorite name. Let's take a look at these names, first to see how they pointed to the Covenant God.

The name "Daniel" means "God is my judge." This name for any young, covenant boy from the Old Testament tribe of Judah would be a reminder that his life was to be pleasing to God. No matter what man might say or do, ultimately Daniel grew up knowing that God was the one who watched over him and that God's truth would guide his life. Ultimately for Daniel, God is his judge, not merely what men may think.

The first of Daniel's three friends listed is "Hananiah," which means "God is gracious" or "God has favored." What a wonderful reminder of the grace and goodness of God in this young man's life and the favor that God has bestowed on him to be a child of the covenant.

Next, we meet "Mishael," which means "who is what God is" — an amazing reminder that nothing in all of creation can compare with the covenant God of Israel.

Lastly, we meet "Azariah," which means "Jehovah is my helper." What a great blessing to know that every time you hear your name, you should be reminded of God's help shown to you in the covenant.

In the Hebrew language, each of these names — whether in their prefix or suffix — has a reference to God. The confusion now comes into play in changing their names away from referencing the Covenant God to giving them names that have a reference to the gods of Babylon.

Old Testament scholars list these Babylonian gods as Marduk, Bel, Aku and Nabu, the latter of which is sometimes spelled “Nebo” or “Nego.” “Daniel” now becomes “Belteshazzar,” which means “protect the king.” Notice the prefix “Bel.” “Hananiah” becomes “Shadrach,” which means “command of Aku.” “Mishael” becomes “Meshach,” which means “who is what Aku is.” And “Azariah” becomes “Abednego,” which means “servant of Nabu or Nego.”

King Nebuchadnezzar’s name-changing plan is very instructive for us. Along with other forms of assimilation, these young men have now been given new names that are designed to focus their minds on the Pagan gods of Babylon, rather than the covenant God of Judah. Will a name change by itself make all the difference? Maybe not. But if you add all of the elements of the plan together, it can potentially be pretty destructive.

It’s a self-evident truth that “the way we think — about God, ourselves, others and the world — determines the way we live.” Nebuchadnezzar is intent on changing these young men’s thinking, which is intended to change the way they live.

Keep in mind that this formal school of Babylon is going to last for three years. Every day, these young men are separated from the proper worship of God. They have no contact with God’s people. Every day is designed to assimilate them more and more into the life, the language, the learning, the pleasures, the food and all the ways of Babylon.

In addition to this, every day they’re set up for confusion about who is really important in their lives. These young men are now called by different names — names that are designed to take their thoughts away from God and teach them that they should now depend on the gods and the king of Babylon. This type of assimilation still happens today. Christians should be careful about ways in which we and our children can be negatively influenced by separation, assimilation and confusion by anyone or anything that would seek to draw us away from God.

Rev. Dr. Steve Jones is pastor of Paxton’s Westminster Presbyterian Church.