

# Don't Call Me Reverend

It goes without saying that no member of the clergy should ever deliberately take God's name as their title of office. Over the years, however, a seed thought planted by well-meaning Christians has germinated into the belief that for centuries clerics have done just that. As a result, when some Christians hear a religious leader called "reverend," they view it as an act of ignorance, or arrogance at the presumption of assuming one of God's names as a title of church leadership. Believers holding to this teaching categorically reject the idea of calling any church official "reverend." The basis for that misinformed position is traceable to Psalm 111:9, which declares: "Holy and reverend is his name" (KJV).

A surface reading of the text does appear to suggest "reverend," like "El Shaddai" or "Jehovah Shalom," is one of God's many names. However, upon closer inspection, the text itself casts a very different light upon the meaning behind David's word choices. Contrary to the misunderstanding embraced by some Christians, the Bible does not suggest "Reverend" as one of the names for God. In fact, the words "holy" and "reverend" are used adjectively in the text. Thus, they describe the nature of God's name. So Psalm 111:9 is not a declaration of names for God, but rather expressions of the qualities of God's name. Therefore, a correct reading of the passage could be "the name of God is a holy name," "the name of God is to be revered." So calling a religious leader "reverend" is not problematic because "reverend" is a name for God.

Why then are we correct in not referring to clergy members as "reverend"? By definition, the word "reverend" according to Webster is an adjective meaning "worthy of being revered or entitled to reverence." Let's be honest. This definition presents a new set of problems when we try to apply it to an individual's name. Is any servant of God worthy of being revered or entitled to reverence? Of course not. However, over time, by use and custom, reverend has found acceptance as a noun, and has become the customary title or form of address for clergy in many Christian churches. (See *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, fourth edition [Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000]).

Certainly, respect is due every child of God, even clergy. However, for some men and women in the ranks of the clergy there is no faster means of terminating a conversation than by addressing them as merely "brother" or "sister," rather than by their honorific title "Reverend." Within the fraternity of clergy there are those who view omission of "Reverend" from their title when they are being addressed as insulting and disrespectful. All of which might be somewhat understandable if there happened to be even the slightest biblical support for the practice of using "Reverend." However, such support does not exist in the Bible.

It was not the practice of the early Christian church to refer to church leaders by the title "Reverend." Instead, taking their cues from Scripture, those of the faith employed biblical titles, such as "Elder," "Pastor," "Evangelist," "Deacon." A thorough search of the Scriptures fails to produce even one instance of anyone being called "Reverend."

The honorific title "Reverend" did not surface and gain acceptance as a means of respectful address to members of the clergy class until nearly 1,400 years after Calvary, in the fifteenth century. Then in the seventeenth century

“Reverend” became widely used as a prefix before the names of church leaders. During the same century, clergy in the Catholic Church, seeking an expansion of public respect for their positions, helped craft the titles “Very Reverend” for clergy serving as deans of universities and “Right Reverend” for bishops. Meanwhile, archbishops and cardinals became “Most Reverend” (Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, (third edition revised). Does the Bible support the teaching that church leaders may rightly bear titles that seem to suggest their worthiness of reverential treatment? The short answer is no.

There are many reasons for neither using nor accepting the title “Reverend.” A few of them are: 1. There is no biblical authority for it. God’s Word speaks of prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (see Ephesians 4:11), but never mentions reverends. 2. God alone is entitled to reverence. Revelation 4:11 shares, “You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power.” No matter how good they are, even the best church leaders fall far short of the divine benchmark. Therefore, they are unqualified to be revered. 3. Jesus cautions against assigning religious titles that may cause egos to puff up. “But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’. . . do not call anyone on earth your father” (Matthew 23:8, 9). 4. The very real danger of leaders feeling exalted over those they lead, rather than viewing their roles as that of servant-leaders. Paul counsels in Romans 12:3 “not to think . . . more highly than [one] ought to think.”

Are those who serve the flock of God worthy of respect, courtesy, and perhaps even honor? Absolutely. However, please don’t call me “Reverend.” Save your reverence for God. No one else is entitled to receive reverence from humanity. There’s no other Reverend in the church.