

Name Dropping

sermon digest

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Acts 19:1-7, 13-20

larry dipboye

Early in the Reformation, in October of 1529, Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, leaders of the Lutheran and Reformed churches, met in Marburg to work out their differences. Although they reached consensus on fourteen major issues, they encountered a radical disagreement over the meaning of the Lord's Supper. In contrast with the Catholic Mass in which the bread and wine were believed to become the literal body and blood of Christ, Zwingli insisted that the elements were only symbols. While distinguishing his theology from Catholic literalism, Luther believed in the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Luther pounded the table with his fist as he declared the words of the priest in the consecration of the host, "*Hoc est Corpus Meum!*" (This is my body) and repeated, "*est, est, est!*" (is, is is).

Luther and Zwingli never reconciled their difference over the Mass, and the divergent Protestant views of the Lord's Supper have continued into the modern era. Luther's chant, "*Hoc est Corpus Meum,*" the liturgical phrase in the Mass that transformed the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, was indeed the high moment in the Mass. The uneducated laity heard the Latin phrase as "hocus pocus," a magical incantation which no doubt haunted Zwingli and his kin.

Shall we quibble over words? The problem with magic is a persistent issue in Acts especially in light of the miracles associated with the apostles. Luke walks a narrow line in affirming the power of the Holy Spirit that accompanies the apostles while condemning the attempt of magicians to capture and use the power of God by repeating the words and acts of faith as magical incantations. When Paul came to Ephesus on his final missionary journey, he encountered followers of John the Baptist who did not seem to know about Jesus, the church, or the Holy Spirit. In addition to instruction in the faith, Paul baptized them "in the name of the Lord Jesus" and laid his hands on them. The twelve converts received the Holy Spirit, spoke in tongues, and prophesied. This was a second baptism, a practice later condemned by penalty of death. Baptism in the name of Jesus seemed to contradict the great commission baptism in Matthew that invokes Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Was the "name of the Lord Jesus" a magical incantation (hocus pocus) in baptism and the laying on of hands a magical act of empowerment? We still teach little children that the magic words *please* and *thank you* are effective in causing people to respond with courtesy and kindness. Do we really think that is magic or human nature? Christian traditions often revolve around using the right words, phrases, or theological formulae to attract the favor of God. Augustine taught that the key to effective baptism was the recitation of the Trinitarian formula, "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." One did not have to be an ordained priest or even an adult Christian to administer effective baptism.

A few years ago I baptized a young man whose family background was Pentecostal. His mother pled with me to baptize him in the name of Jesus, not the Trinity. It seems that Pentecostals follow Acts, while the vast majority of churches still follow Matthew's great commission formula and Augustine. Are we not quibbling over words and turning the language of faith into magical incantations with both traditions?

Yet, the power of word is a significant part of the Judeo-Christian story: The word of God brought the world into existence. In Christ, the word became flesh and dwelled among us. In Jewish tradition the sacred name for God JHWH could be viewed in the written text but never spoken out loud except by the high priest on Yom Kippur. In the Jewish congregation, *Adonai* LORD is substituted for the sacred name of God. Was the name of God a magical formula for correct theology or effective prayer, or a statement of the holiness of God that transcends all of our ideas and words about God?

There is little doubt that the Christian reference to Jesus as Lord in the Gospels is connected to the Old Testament tradition, and Paul's statement of faith (Philippians 2:10) exalts the name of Jesus so that "at the name of Jesus every knee should bend." Had the name of Jesus become a magic word to compel divine compliance with the human will? Before I knew anything about separation of church and state in the First Amendment, I was tapped as my high school chaplain appointed to read Scripture and pray to begin each day of class. We usually recited the Lord's Prayer, but one day I offered an extemporaneous prayer. Somehow I sensed that not everyone in my school shared my

faith, so I prayed in the holy name of God. My speech teacher and debate coach cornered me after class to inform me that God only hears prayer in the name of Jesus. I was later reminded of that moment in life when the president of the Southern Baptist Convention told the world that God does not hear the prayer of a Jew—poor Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

We do not possess God; hopefully, we are possessed by God. The whole business of magic seems to revolve around the question of power, possession, and control. Worship acknowledges the transcendence of God beyond our reach and certainly beyond our grasp. Worshipers are mortals who bow before the eternal; magicians are mortals who claim to possess and control the power of the supernatural. We continue to struggle to know the difference.

We know Mark Twain/Samuel Clemens for his humorous novels and comments of more than a century ago. He was something of a genius in the use of humor to communicate serious opinions about politics and religion of his day. Professor Long at Baylor noted that in Twain's novels, Tom Sawyer was the conservative Republican, while Huckleberry Finn was the liberal Democrat. His depiction of Mrs. Watson's slave Jim was a social protest to the dehumanization of slavery. Twain's religious views come through in subtle ways to express his cynicism.

In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Huckleberry was living with Widow Douglas and her sister Miss Watson. After getting scolded and prayed over by Miss Watson for coming home with dirty clothes from an all night vigil with Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry was admonished to pray every day. Hoping for a radical conversion, Miss Watson also promised Huck that he would get whatever he asked in prayer. Huck concluded: "it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fish-line, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work." Furthermore, he observed, Deacon Winn had never recovered the money he lost, the Widow's stolen silver snuffbox was still missing, and Miss Watson still couldn't gain weight. Huckleberry decided there was nothing to prayer.

Now, Huckleberry was an equal opportunity skeptic. When Tom Sawyer told him about rubbing magic lamps that produce giant genies that run out and get you anything you want, Huckleberry conducted an experiment that gave genies the same chance to produce as prayer: "I got an old tin lamp and an iron ring and went out in the woods and rubbed and rubbed. . . , but it warn't no use, none of the genies come. So I judged that all that stuff was only just one of Tom Sawyer's lies." To cap it off, Huckleberry concluded, "It had all the marks of a Sunday school."

I would dare suggest that Huckleberry's issue is not limited to a child's view of the faith or to the primitive world of the nineteenth century. Huckleberry's views conveyed Twain's opinion of the church and of prayer. We might justly protest that we do not confuse prayer with a magic lamp; but, at the same time, we need to realize that Huckleberry expresses a grassroots view of our faith. One might ask about the WWJD bracelets that one can buy at Walmart, made in Taiwan of course, or the glorified Santa Christianity promoted in the "prosperity gospel." The battle to post the Ten Commandments on the walls of public buildings has less to do with the Law of God than winning a political tug of war. This became apparent recently in a reporter's conversation with a national politician. When asked, he could not quote the Ten Commandments which he insisted should be posted on public walls. Does the meaning of the words matter, or are the Ten Commandments another magic amulet to hang around the necks of unbelievers? One might raise the same question about words of the Bible.

The language of our faith along with the names we associate with God reach out to the truth and reality that we cannot grasp and can never possess. The first and last thing that we must do when we enter the worship of our God is to lay our magic at the door without the slightest hint that we might have some control over the power behind the creation of the world. Glenn Hinson's book *The Reaffirmation of Prayer* is a descriptive introduction to various facets of the practice of prayer that culminate in "Surrender." Hinson cites the Gethesemane prayer of Jesus as an example for all prayer, "not my will but thine."