

Deny (*arneomai*)

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The Greek word *arneomai*, which is translated as “deny” in English, often had more radical implications than we usually associate with “deny.” It implied not just dissociation but active opposition. Epictetus said that philosophers who had turned into mere Sophists should deny their philosophical position so as not to bring it into disrepute. He meant to publicly repudiate what they had learned and place themselves in opposition to it. Josephus wrote that the king of Sihon denied Moses’ passage through his land and mobilized his troops to oppose him.

In a religious sense, the word was used of those who were not on and opposed God’s side. The Wisdom of Solomon speaks of “being punished through those whom they accepted as gods, they saw and apprehended the true God whom they had denied (12:27)” and adds, “For ungodly men who denied you were beaten by the strength of your arm” (16:16).

With this in mind, we see a clear connection between Peter’s words in Mark 14:66-72 and his earlier words in 8:33. Both constituted denials. Both arrayed Peter with the world and against God. In 8:33 Peter was privately rejecting God’s way; in 14:66-72 he was publicly rejecting it. If we view either of these denials from a purely psychological point of view, we miss the common theological point: those who are not with Christ are against him. As an exegetical tool, psychology may be more popular than theology, but it doesn’t do the job.

A Hard Saying

This brings us to Matthew 10:32-3, only half of which is relished by most modern Christians. (If some people were to approach mathematics as they approach theology, they would cheer the statement “A positive number is not a negative number” but would have deep

reservations about saying “A negative number is not a positive number.”) When Jesus says, “Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven,” he implies the second half, “But whoever denies me before men, I will deny before my Father in heaven.” There is no gray area at the level of salvation whatever there may be at the level of morality. Morality is what we do. Salvation is what God does. To confuse the two is to become a heretic, a sentimentalist and sometimes a famous preacher (Abelard, for example). There is a place for morality in Christian theology, but not at the level of salvation. Those who follow Jesus will make mistakes, they will sin, and they will receive forgiveness and help, but such things are available only on the Way. It would be meaningless to offer Christ’s merits to those who deny Christ—a pat case of casting pearls before those who are unable to appreciate them.

Morality is a matter of how you walk the Way. Salvation is a matter of which Way you walk. Denial of Christ is opposition to Christ.

In the Epistles

The epistles understood denying Christ (and confessing Christ) in the same way that Matthew 10:32-3 did. In 2 Timothy 2:12, “if we deny him, he also will deny us,” is an obvious reference to the teaching of Jesus which Matthew gives. Titus 1:16, “They profess to know God, but they deny him with their deeds,” refers not to a verbal demur but to effective opposition—as does Titus 2:12, “the grace of God . . . training us to renounce irreligious and worldly passions.”

The hero of faith must be the villain of the world. We cannot pull the world out of quicksand without wrenching its muscles and straining its joints. Our denial of evil must not be a descriptive

denial but a violent denial. If we no longer want to think of ourselves as a mighty army, we must at least see ourselves as organized protesters making an unceasing demonstration for Christ and against those who deny him as Pilate denied him—to the death.

There is a denial which comes from the heart and sweeps through all the affairs of life. The opposition which Christianity faces today is not an academic opposition but a visceral opposition, an opposition which does not merely prefer not to accept Christ, but which loathes and attacks every manifestation of Christian passion, principles, and institutions. Any denial of Christ, what he did and what he stood for, is opposition to Christianity, a fact which Christians deprecate or depreciate at their peril. In many parts of the world, the words of Revelation 2:13 are apt and awful: “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; you hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you where Satan dwells.” There is still a confession to the death and a denial which is death.

In our use of the word, we need to be sensitive to the difference between “denying that . . .” and “denying.” When Juliet says to Romeo, “Deny thy father,” she is not asking him to falsify a fact but to change sides, to become a Capulet and oppose all that the Montagues stand for. The distinction and the connection between “denying” and “denying that” is stark in 1 John 2:22 where one who denies that Jesus is the Christ is a liar, but another who denies the Father and the Son is the antichrist, the enemy of God.

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