

JESUS IS LORD!

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The fundamental confession of Christianity is that Jesus is Lord. The meaning of that conviction is the subject before us.

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To begin with, we must go back to a scene which has become distorted by time and tradition: "To think again the first Christian's thoughts about Jesus one must be prepared to enter a strange world. Mentally the reader must cross five thousand miles, nineteen centuries, and an even wider gulf of ideas."¹

We might wonder if the hard journey is really necessary. Yes, it is. The nineteenth century lives of Jesus failed at this very point. They turned out to be little more than an author's projection. There resulted as many jesuses as there were biographies, while the real Jesus failed to come through. Apart from the discipline to weigh the historical record seriously, we can expect to do no better.

What do we find upon arrival back in the strange surroundings of a yesterday obscured by unfamiliar mores and familiar words rended from context over the intervening years? The first thing is that Jesus taught with authority, in contrast to rabbinic custom. The Hebrew was the first great history people; he used the past to chart a responsible course for the future. Precedent was critical for such a venture. Without it, the past would be lost, and man destined to repeat his follies. With careful concern for precedent, progress could be assured. So, the rabbis tied commentary to decision and decision to commentary, a growing body of documented wisdom to guide man's steps.

Then Jesus came, teaching: "It has been said of old, but I say to you." The rabbis were offended, and the people astounded. Jesus taught as none other, with an authority assumed by His relationship to the Father. Time has eroded the shock of the Nazarine's *presumption*. Tradition has made it commonplace. We must go back to feel the impact of a bearing which transcended the need and expectation for human corroboration. We must consider the unique impact of Jesus' authoritative teaching.

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1. William Ramsay, *The Christ of the Earliest Christians*. Richmond: John Knox, 1959, p. 32.

The next thing we observe is that Jesus assumed peculiar prerogatives. "The Temple, the unassailable and impregnable seat of socio-religious authority, must have provided parasitic priests and middlemen with an effective shield against any nonviolent popular protest. It was Jesus' attempt to smash this shield, as part of his larger enterprise of presiding over the Kingdom of God in defiance of the Roman power, that set in motion the events leading to his downfall."² To see in Jesus' aggressiveness simply a violent turn, is to confuse His identification with the populace and distinction from the Zealots. He took the part of the common man while distrusting the sword. The issue lay deeper, as Carmichael surmises, in Jesus' regal action. Others skirted issues out of deference to the religious elite or made a power struggle out of their excesses, but Jesus acted with the objective dispatch of a royal visitor.

Perhaps still more startling to Jesus' contemporaries was the basis on which He claimed His authority. It earned Him the charge of blasphemy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed: "Jesus' testimony to himself stands by itself, self-authenticating."³ It does not stand alone, in that the testimony is coupled to preachment and practice, but it stands by itself, as revelation of the meaning of this most unique life. Jesus said: "I am," the claim to Divine presence. Some have hoped to locate an earlier level of Christian teaching behind this testimony, a hero eventually elevated to God. But the journey back discloses no such distinction: "The truth is that it is impossible to penetrate back to a time in the history of the church where the Risen Christ was not looked upon as a Divine Being."⁴

This, then, is what we find: a historical figure assuming Divine prerogative for His teaching, in His behavior, and to justify His action. It is in this context that the church concludes that "Jesus is Lord."

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It remains for us to make explicit what has already been implied concerning the lordship of Christ. William Ramsay muses: "Perhaps the most interesting of the Messianic titles given to Jesus by the Jerusalem church is the title *Lord*. Those today who use it thoughtlessly Sunday after Sunday hardly realize the original significance of this word."⁵ The meaning must be derived from that early milieu, unprejudiced by centuries of religious rationalization, where the term was couched in a particular context of regency.

We are inclined to think of position when told of a king, but Jesus' contemporaries understood power. Royalty seems to us an authority imposed on society, but for them it was the symbol of life itself. The difference is critical when applied to Jesus, for where His claim may seem to some a luxury of belief, He is in fact the necessity of life.

2. Joel Carmichael, *The Death of Jesus*. London: Pelican, 1966, p. 133.

3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology*. London: Collins, 1966, p. 32.

4. Ramsay, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Probably the two outstanding Biblical commentaries on Jesus' lordship (Col. 1:13-23; Heb. 1) stresses the Divine provision for Christian subjects. He gives us what we would otherwise lack, and our service is a grateful response to His benevolence and contingent upon His grace. That is to say, you can not out-give God. Only very little people fail to see how very great things the Lord would do for them.

The same passages imply related responsibilities. Paul's discourse on the lordship of Christ nestles into an account of Christian discipleship—his and that of the Colossian believers. The apostle had received a good report from the church, and commends them further to God, while relating his own determination to press on. The author of Hebrews similarly concludes his commentary on Jesus' privileged position with: "For this reason we must pay closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it" (Heb. 2:1).

A Jewish writer struggles with the uniqueness of Jesus: "But to seek out the sinner, and, instead of avoiding the bad companion, to choose him as your friend in order to work his moral redemption, this was, I fancy, something new in the religious history of Israel. . . . He (Jesus) could quench the evil and quicken the good by giving to the sinner somebody to admire and to love. He asked for service, and put it in the place of sin."⁶ Montefiori questions whether others have either the insight or peculiar capability to pull off the reclamation of lives in Jesus' manner, and his hesitancy is well taken; the redemption being based on a relationship where Jesus is Lord. Christ, we are reminded, is the foundation stone, readily rejected by the builders, but the sole name published among men for our salvation (Acts 4:11-12).

So, Jesus was here, where men heard and saw Him, and Jesus is God here—revealing His royal prerogative to reclaim man and holding him responsible. Jesus, indeed is Lord!

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While some are reluctant to go back, others hesitate in proceeding in the light of what we have discovered. Where the former lose the foundation, the latter frustrate the faith; the one ignores Divine presence and the other human potential. As we have resisted the first temptation, we shall attempt to overcome the second as well.

The essence of life is community, and there are irrevocable laws governing it. *Community* implies sharing, common conditions, common concerns, and common experience. Man has no life in isolation. What he is is the product of social interaction; procreation results from a social relationship and identity is forged by participation in society. This is why alienation is so critical a human consideration, for it violates the very nature of life itself.

6. C. G. Montefiori, *Some Elements of the Religious Teaching of Jesus According to the Synoptic Gospels*. London: Macmillan, 1910, pp. 57-58.

Community does not come about just any old way. It is structured by the mandates, or commands, of God. Traditionally, we have understood these to be four in number: those relating to family, government, labor, and church.

We shall first want to separate the mandates for purpose of discussion and then consider how they tie together. The home provides the context in which life is perpetuated. Intercourse is not masturbation, and the family associations not simply exchanged services. All of this takes place within a primary relationship, a sharing of reciprocal responsibilities and consideration.

And the family involves more than parents and children. It also relates to the clan and strangers within the household (Ex. 12:49; Lev. 24:22; Num. 15:15). Even where the close clan ties of the Hebrew community do not exist, Christian hospitality is still binding (Rom. 12:13; Titus 1:8; I Peter 4:9). That is to suggest that while social structures may vary considerably, a larger family concept (to include relatives and those to whom the privileges of the home may be extended) is called for.

Moving on with the mandates, political considerations constitute a large part of the Old Testament, and play a much larger role in the New Testament than generally believed. Vladimir Simkhovitch, for instance, points out: "The central problem of his people was so enveloping that we can take for granted that Jesus' religious and intellectual life revolved around it, and that his own development consisted in the gradual solution of this very problem. To repeat, at the given time there was but one problem for the Jews—a single, all-absorbing national problem that became under the circumstances the religious problem as well."⁷ We need not accept Simkhovitch's statement without qualification to acknowledge the important place that political concerns played in Jesus' life and ministry. Jesus lived and labored within a religious establishment, where no sharp distinction could be made between political and religious matters. They were part of the same *spiritual* concern.

Another reason why we are inclined to overlook the political implications of Jesus' life and teaching is that the early Christians were regularly hindered from assuming places of responsibility, first in the Hebrew and then in the Roman spheres. They responded, however, by pledging their support to government (Rom. 13:12), and waited such time as conditions would allow them to take up a more active leadership.

The code: "If anyone will not work, neither let him eat" (II Thess. 3:10) was more than an expedient guideline for the Pauline churches. It reflected the deep and abiding respect for constructive enterprise, the belief that man is obligated to God for meeting his needs and those of his fellows. Bear your own and the burdens of others (Gal. 6:2, 5) meant

7. Vladimir Simkhovitch, *Toward the Understanding of Jesus*. New York: Macmillan, 1951, p. 28.

that each would do what he could and seldom would any suffer for what he could not do. That is, no one ought to gather that someone else is responsible to do for him what he will not do for himself, but neither should he neglect the needs of others in concentrating on his own. The economic mandate in this way becomes another means of cementing community.

It may at first seem strange to include the ecclesiastical mandate along with those preceding it, for it seems to relate to a select group of people. But this appearance, in a larger sense, is not the case. The fact that only a segment of mankind responds does not eliminate the duty of all; the rejection does not cancel out the call. In practical terms, the command means that man is charged with entering and permitting the entrance of others into the fellowship of God's people (Matt. 23:4, 13). The Pharisees, Jesus argued, were guilty of a dual offense, they turned Him off and turned others away.

The mandates taken together form a structure for social organization and life. They are commands which flesh out the decalogue: "To love another as myself is to guarantee him those same prerogatives I desire for myself: the privilege of filial relationship, the opportunity for labor, and justice and mercy from society. That is not enough, however, for it is only as our self-concern is elevated by the love of God that life falls into place."⁸ And we can reach the same conclusion by taking the subject of reverence, and tying it back into the concept of love. The key word in the commands is reverence or respect. Respect is the foundation of the family (Eph. 5:21), government (Rom. 13:3), labor (II Thess. 3:11-12), and the church (Eph. 5:24, 33). Now, "a genuine response to God's love expressed a sincere reverence and respect for Him in word as well as in the total pattern of daily living. . . . Fear in the sense of 'being afraid' of God arose only when the vital love relationship expressed in the first two commandments was decimated."⁹

One thing more should be added. The mandates understood individually or collectively are anything but constricting in their intent or intelligent application. "Since man's nature leads him to search endlessly for new environments, and for new adventures, there is no possibility of maintaining a *status quo*. Even if we had enough learning and wisdom to achieve at any given time an harmonious state of ecological equilibrium between mankind and the other inhabitants and components of spaceship Earth, it would be a dynamic equilibrium, which would be compatible with man's continuing development."¹⁰ Community is progressive, building a social legacy for the use of succeeding generations. The mandates recognize this volatile nature, and give man a persisting

8. From *Credentials of An Evangelical* (scheduled for publication by Word Press in January, 1973).

9. Samuel Schultz, *The Prophets Speak*. New York: Harper & Row, 1968, p. 47.

10. Rene Dubos, *So Human an Animal*. New York: Scribner, 1969, p. 264.

obligation within which to exercise his growing comprehension and improved technique.

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We have been considering the meaning of Jesus' lordship in the cultural setting of His incarnation and for succeeding generations as realized through God's pattern for society. Next we shall want to investigate how Jesus' lordship provides direction (gives content) for those observing the necessary conditions for community.

Bonhoeffer makes a valuable distinction: "Christ as idea is timeless truth; the idea of God embodied in Jesus is accessible to any one at any time. The word as address stands in contrast to this. . . . It is not timeless, but takes place in history."¹¹ Christ as idea is timeless truth. That is, Jesus revealed once and for all the eternal nature of God—His justice, His love, His person.

What, then, of the Word as address? Bonhoeffer claims that where the Word as idea is timeless, the Word as address is timely. That is, it is experiential, the confrontation with Christ in terms of concrete responsibility.

The ideal needs to be explored, before we proceed further. You can go about conserving in the wrong way. As a child, I spent countless hours playing with my soldiers, and for years the survivors of my imaginary wars were hidden away in boxes in the attic. One day they were discovered and resurrected for my boys' use. There are, we see, two ways of preservation—the box and life. The one furthers sentimentality, and the other renders some service. Now, some put Christ in a box and for all intent and purpose He remains there except for special occasions such as for attending church services. And then He is celebrated, not as a militant leader but a nostalgic figure from the past. The result is creedalism—strict conformity to traditional statement, and legalism—strict conformity to traditional ways. And while the old beliefs may be right, and old ways contain much wisdom, our legacy was meant to be proved in life's crucible rather than packaged away for sentimental reflection. The church is a mighty army instead of a museum entry.

The alternative is no better; a radical contextualism loses perspective as well. All of us have had the experience of coming in on a discussion which is already in progress, and where no one makes the attempt to brief us as to what has previously transpired. We sit there wondering how to interpret this or that statement, why some emotion is expressed, and what the purpose of a given interchange might be. Perhaps we make what seems to be an appropriate comment only to find that it is turned aside as being irrelevant. We may be frustrated, possibly curious, but certainly out of it. The problem is that we lack the point of reference located in the past. In a similar way, there are those enthusiastic about

11. Bonhoeffer, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

the possibilities of community, anxious to relate, but missing the critical insight to put the situation together. The result is an existential humanism—a radical commitment to the present as immediately perceived. And while it is important to sense the momentary circumstance, an overview is necessary for constructive action.

What correction does Christ provide to an irresponsible celebration of the past or a superficial crusade for the present? Guidance through the inscripturated Word.

Man speaks (that is his means of communication), and understands the speech of others (that is part of his peculiar capability.) God might, conceivably, choose another way to communicate to us, but how would we know His intent or that He had one? No, words are the way with and to man. We should not shy away from the idea of verbal inspiration. What other kind of communication could there possibly be that man would understand?

The crux of the matter is that we ought to take the Scripture as verbally true, both in its totality and particulars. It was Albert Schweitzer who urged: "Every saying contains in its own way the whole Jesus. The very strangeness and unconditionedness in which He stands before us makes it easier for individuals to find their own personal standpoint in regard to Him."¹² This, Schweitzer said in defence of the apocalyptic figure presented in the Gospels, and in rebuke of those who tamper with the text. We can not afford to lose any passage, witnessing in its unique fashion to Christ, for whatever the reason proposed to justify the liberty taken.¹³

Alan Stibbs concludes the matter this way: "For the written word is but the completion or reflection of the Living Word... It is, so to speak, the halo round His head in which His glory finds visible or intellegible, because verbal, expression."¹⁴

Once we have allowed Scripture to define Jesus as other than ourselves, we are in the enviable position of learning the implications of His lordship over life. In the first place, Christ is the wise Other. Even the well-intentioned person gives qualified help and sometimes obstructs our development. (They can, for instance, destroy our initiative, self-respect, and discipline by a paternalistic attitude.) But Jesus, to the contrary, knows when to be firm and where to encourage. He does the appropriate thing each time.

Christ is also the reconciling Other: "Here Christ stands, in the centre, between me and myself, between the old existence and the

12. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. London: A. & C. Black, 1922, p. 368.

13. Schweitzer, in a sense, fell prey to his own warning. His rejection of the "consistent eschatology" derived from Scripture (as an interim consideration) in favor of the idea of reverence for life amounted to capitulation of the Biblical norm.

14. Alan Stibbs, *Understanding God's Word*. London: InterVarsity, 1950, p. 16.

new."¹⁵ He recovers me; He brings me to myself; He restores me to His way. The human analogy is the best we have to understand this glorious truth, but it, too, falls far short. We can all recall someone who has given us leverage to live. He came at a time, with a perspective, communicating a confidence, and providing the means for us to accept life's challenge. But we outgrew the relationship. Now, Jesus meets us time and again with a futurity that is present. Wolfhart Pannenberg pointedly comments: "To love the preliminary (Jesus) is no little thing. Christians are surely right to call for devotion to Jesus. He who despises the preliminary because he waits for the ultimate (the Kingdom of God) will not be able to recognize the ultimate in its coming."¹⁶ God's future is open to those acting now in faith. What will eventuate in time will not circumvent God's present provision. Christ is the door to life and all that life will hold.

In addition, Christ is the redeeming Other. I experience His will as other and yet my own. Paul put it this way: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me" (Gal. 2:20). Christ's will was becoming his and, yet, I suspect that every compatibility opened new areas of disparity. The experience of Christians is like that, if we are honest with one another.

The result of Christ's ministry is the fruit of the Spirit. Paul contrasts the unifying effect of love (Gal. 5:22) to the disintegrating influence of the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:20-21). The former is like a balm for the many afflictions with which we are tormented. And Paul contrasts again the constructive result of power, love, and self-control to the disabling attack of fearful timidity (II Tim. 1:7). Christ is not satisfied with our believing who He is, but in our becoming what He desires for us.

Life, for the Christian, is an expanding experience of responsibility to and provision from God. It is community, located in the sovereignty of God, mediated by Christ, and actualized through the Holy Spirit. The disciple lives in a future reality already in a profound sense present. There are many things that he does not know, but he knows in Whom he believes, and commits his life to Christ's sustaining grace (II Tim. 1:12). Then, and only then, can he confess with the saints of all ages that "Christ is Lord!"

15. Bonhoeffer, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

16. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969, p. 126.