

Jesus Is Lord

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What does a Christian mean by saying, Jesus is Lord? The answer all depends on which century you have in mind.

If you're talking about the first Christians, those who lived under the rule of the Roman Empire, the statement "Jesus is Lord" was nothing less than a fast ticket to trouble if the local authorities chose to take you seriously. The empire already had a lord—Caesar—and he didn't take kindly to the idea of sharing his authority with some teacher from the eastern hinterlands of his domain.

In a letter to the emperor Trajan around A.D. 111, a provincial governor named Pliny double-checked to see if he was handling the Christians properly:

"I interrogated them whether they were Christians; if they confessed it I repeated the question twice again, adding the threat of capital punishment; if they still persevered, I ordered them to be executed. . . .

"Those who denied they were, or had ever been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered adoration, with wine and frankincense, to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for that purpose . . . and who finally cursed Christ . . . I thought it proper to discharge."

What did the emperor think of all this?

"The method you have pursued, my dear Pliny . . . is extremely proper," Trajan wrote back.

As you can see, things have changed. Not many presidents or prime ministers have the nerve these days to proclaim themselves lord. Great Britain still has a House of Lords, but it has no power to command. It's a group of wealthy gentlemen who mainly agree to the decisions of the noisier House of Commons. They are known best for the long robes and white wigs they still wear on state occasions.

So what is a lord? We hardly know anymore.

Juan Carlos Ortiz, a former Argentine pastor who now lives in California, says, "We have an interesting problem in Spanish with the word *lord*. *Lord* is *señor*, the same word we use for *mister*." In other words, Señor Lopez runs the gas station on the corner, Señor Rodriguez drives a city bus, and Señor Jesucristo listens to your prayers.

"The result in Spanish," Ortiz continues, "is that we have lost the 'lord' concept. To call Jesus the Lord (Señor) doesn't really say anything very strongly.

"But since I have come among English-speaking people, I have found that you have the same problem, even though you have two separate words, *mister* and *lord*, in your language. . . . The Bible presents Jesus as King, as Lord, as the maximum authority. Jesus is at the very center" (Juan Carlos Ortiz, *Disciple* [Carol Stream, Ill.: Creation House, 1975], 11, 12).

Yet in most English-speaking countries, there is no king, no highest authority. The United States government, for example, is based on a division of power into three equally high branches.

Perhaps the fastest way to cut through the jargon is simply to get honest and say a lord is a boss. The person in charge. The person who has the power to tell us what to do.

Jesus? He was a wonderful man who set a fine example for us all, said many wise things—but does he give us orders? Yes. The only remaining question is whether we will obey his orders or whether we will rebel. Is he the boss or not? That is the question every Christian must answer every day of his life.

My wife and I are currently in the midst of raising twin daughters. They're one another's best friend most of the time, but neither one (understandably) wants to be dominated by the other. They're very sensitive to issues of fairness and equality.

One day, when they were about six years old, Rhonda felt Tricia was taking charge of playtime a little too aggressively, making too many one-sided decisions without proper debate. Suddenly she shot back, "Look—you're not the president of me!"

A lot of us strong-willed Christians have trouble admitting Jesus is our president, our boss, the one with the right to tell us what to do. We know that he is forever a good boss, a kind and thoughtful leader who never takes advantage of his people; that he is always looking out for our good—but still, the idea of surrendering to him sticks in our throat. In that case, he really is not Lord (despite what we may recite or sing on Sunday morning).

When Jesus was on this earth he knew he was the boss, and so he took charge. He walked up to more than one total stranger, looked him in the eye, and said, "Follow me." He didn't beg or plead; he didn't offer a guaranteed salary or any other kind of "deal"—he just gave a straight directive. Then Matthew, or Zacchaeus, or the rich young ruler had to make a choice: Will I obey this man or won't I? Some did, some didn't.

One who decided to obey was John. Decades later, he put it to us bluntly in

an epistle: "We know that we have come to know him [Jesus] if we obey his commands. The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him" (1 John 2:3-5).

Not much room to weasel, is there?

The Scripture is chock-full of commands from the boss. Again, as John reminds us, "his commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). But they are commands. They force us to respond, "OK, I will," or "No, I won't." In the first case, Jesus is Lord. In the second, we make him just a nice guy.

Jesus understood that we would struggle sometimes over whether to obey. He knew our stubbornness. That's why he told the story of the two sons whose father directed them to go work in the vineyard (Matthew 21:28-32). The first son said, "No way"—but later thought better of it, got his hoe, and went out after all. The second son (a smooth fellow who knew all the right answers) said, "Sure, Dad"—but never arrived.

Jesus told that story to make the point that talk is cheap. Action is what counts. The statement "Jesus is Lord" is easy to mouth; it is harder to live. The Christian life is more than a matter of believing the right things. It is doing what the Person in charge says to do.

What we must get into our minds is that the reason for doing what he says is not always apparent—but he does know what he is talking about. A ship's captain was once guiding his vessel along a rocky coast on a cloudy night. He peered ahead and saw a faint light. He ordered his signalman to send this message by radio: "Alter your course ten degrees south."

Soon a message came back: "Alter your course ten degrees north."

The captain was a little disgusted. He sent a second message: "The captain says, 'Alter your course ten degrees south!'"

A second message came back: "Seaman Third Class Jones says, 'Alter your course ten degrees north.'"

This sent the captain into full-scale fuming. "Alter your course ten degrees south—this is a battleship!" he thundered.

One more reply came back: "Alter your course ten degrees north; this is the lighthouse."

Our modern world is full of voices shouting orders into the night, telling others how to live, what to do, how to change. And there is one Voice whose directions seem opposite to all the rest. The listeners are not sure whether to pay him any attention; some are openly sarcastic.

The only trouble is, he is the one voice who knows what he's talking about. He is the Light of the world. He is the authority on this treacherous coastline. He is Lord.