

CHAPTER *One*

The Heart of the Christian Faith

To call Jesus Lord is the heart of the Christian faith.

THE FOREIGN EXCHANGE STUDENTS WERE eager to experience worship at a Christian church, to discover the essence of the Christian message. They had traveled from a culture that afforded them little exposure to the Christian faith. The group was visiting First Baptist Church of Amarillo, Texas, on two consecutive Sundays. It was their only opportunity to gain exposure to a Christian church while they were in the United States. They eagerly awaited the message from the interim pastor, Dr. Brad Creed, then Dean of George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University.

In his sermon, Dr. Creed told a story about a courageous lad named David who conquered an evil giant named Goliath. David conquered the giant, of course, using only smooth stones and a slingshot.

The next Sunday the students visited again, seeking to learn more about the Christian religion. This was the very Sunday I was to preach at First Baptist Church “in view of a call” to serve as pastor. In the midst of my preparation, I forgot to ask the obvious question, *Has anybody preached on 1 Samuel 17 lately?* I just assumed by choosing

an Old Testament text I was safe from selecting a recently preached passage. I took the pulpit before the congregation and before the international students and began to preach as if my landing the job depended on it!

You guessed it! I was confidently expounding 1 Samuel 17, thinking I was leading the people through uncharted territory. I spoke of a courageous lad named David and his victory over the mean Philistine, Goliath! Everyone in the congregation wore the same pleasant grin, just as surely as the Dallas Cowboys wear matching helmets. Naively, I interpreted their expression as pride over the preaching of their soon-to-be pastor. I had no idea I had cluelessly and carelessly chosen to repeat last Sunday's sermon—a sermon impeccably delivered by the dean of the Baptist seminary!

The story line sounded familiar to the international students, too. They were hardly sitting on the edge of their seats pondering how the story ends. They were, unfortunately, all too familiar with the plot: the giant intimidates; the boy is courageous; the giant ridicules; the boy, with the help of God, conquers his fierce opponent. Knowing the end ruins even a good story.

Boy beats big man—to sum it up. The international students must have thought, *This is an interesting story, but who would ever build a religion around such a belief?* To them, the central hero of Christianity must have appeared to be a shepherd boy named David who was aided by a god to slay a giant. Perhaps they pondered, *What is the central meaning in this story? Could Christianity be teaching that good triumphs over evil despite the odds? Or that God will help you slay your giants?* They must have been perplexed, pondering why people would devote their lives to travel the globe and retell the story of the lad and the giant. Questions and uncertainty surely were swirling in their heads.

Of course, you know that David is not the central character of Christianity and that the climactic story line is not about the slaying of the Philistine champion Goliath. But all the international students had to go on was the two similar sermons, a repeated repertoire. Because they were misled by the double dose of David and Goliath, they still needed to find the heart of our faith.

Find Your Faith

Let's pretend. What if in their search for the core of Christianity the international students had chosen to interview you? Let's make the game even harder. If someone asked you to share your core beliefs in just three words, what words would you utter? Could you do it?

I am fully aware that I would have to give you pages, maybe even books, in which to write all that you hold to be true. But every great oak tree begins with a small acorn, and every river starts with a rain-drop. From what seed does your faith grow? And from which droplet do your flood waters of faith flow?

As we read the letters and writings of the earliest Christians, we discover the source of what they held to be true about God, God's creation, and the relationship between God and his creation. Everything they believed, all that they held dear, could be summarized in the most profound statement ever articulated in human history: "Jesus is Lord!" All of Christian history, every word of Scripture, revolves around this central confession of the Lordship of Christ Jesus.

I am hardly claiming too much when I assert that "Jesus is Lord" was the prevailing confession of faith of early Christianity. New Testament scholar Robert H. Mounce declared that "Jesus is Lord" was Christianity's "earliest single-clause Christological confession."¹ Another New Testament scholar, George Ladd, called Jesus' Lordship "the heart of the early Christian confession."² Baptist scholar Stephen Hatfield stated that the Lordship of Jesus is found either implicitly or explicitly throughout Scripture.³

The central nature of this confession—"Jesus is Lord!"—is found prominently in the letters of the Apostle Paul. Salvation, for Paul, was defined by this central confession of Christ's Lordship. He wrote, "If you confess with your mouth *Jesus as Lord*, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9, italics added for emphasis). We find this key confession not only in Paul's letter to the church at Rome but also in his letter to the church in the city of Corinth. When Paul wrote, "No one can say, '*Jesus is Lord*,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3b, italics added for emphasis), he was affirming that "Jesus is Lord" is the most basic confession of

Christian fellowship. In Philippians, Paul envisioned a day when every member of the human race, both the living and the dead, would bow the knee to Jesus, a day when “every tongue will confess that *Jesus Christ is Lord*” (Philippians 2:11, italics added for emphasis).

Confessing the Lordship of Jesus distinguished members of the early church from the unbelieving world that surrounded them, for this confession encapsulated the heart of the faith and life of the Christian community. Therefore, unless we understand what it means to call Jesus *Lord*, we will never comprehend the essence of the message of the New Testament, the essence of all that was held to be true by the New Testament believers.

Before we can know what it means for us to call Jesus *Lord* today, we need to discover the ideas that were evoked when the word *Lord* (Greek, *kurios*) was used in the first century. Briefly examining the uses of the Greek word *kurios* in the ancient world in general, and in the Old and New Testaments in particular, will allow us to understand what early Christians meant when they called Jesus their *Lord* (*kurios*).

Uses in the Ancient World

Kurios, the Greek word for *lord*, was not invented by the early church but rather adapted by it. *Kurios* was such a common term by New Testament times that it appears in every New Testament book except Titus and the Letters of John. One of the most common uses of *kurios* in the ancient world was as a simple, polite form of address meaning *sir*. In a second century A.D. letter, Apion, a soldier in the Roman navy, wrote a letter to his father. His respectful form of address to his father was, “Sir” (*kurios*).⁴ When *kurios* is used like this, as only an expression of courtesy, it does not carry any implication that the person being addressed is divine.

Biblical examples of this common usage of *kurios* are numerous. For example, before the Samaritan woman in John’s Gospel knew the divine identity of Jesus, she addressed him politely as *kurios*, “Sir” (John 4:11, 15, 19). The Greeks who wanted an audience with

Jesus addressed one of the disciples, Philip, as *kurios* (John 12:20–21). The Apostle John recorded, “Now there were some Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast; these then came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and began to ask him, saying, “Sir [*kurios*], we wish to see Jesus.”

In addition to being used as a common, yet polite, form of address meaning *sir*, the Greek word *kurios* was also used as a term of royal distinction, often applied to rulers, governors, and caesars. In fact, on the Rosetta Stone, Ptolemy V, an ancient ruler of Egypt (about 205–181 B.C.), was identified as “Lord.”⁵ Further, in the first century A.D., although some Roman emperors rejected the application of the title to themselves, “the word slowly but surely established itself.”⁶

A fine line exists between the use of *kurios* to designate a god and the use of that title to honor a ruler.⁷ The Roman caesars gradually instituted a religion centered on themselves, a cult designed to increase their power. Christians believing in the exclusive Lordship of the risen Christ often refused to acknowledge an emperor as *kurios*. Despite the fact that Christians would give honor to the Roman emperor in other ways, their refusal to call Caesar *Lord* led to charges of insurrection and, oddly enough, atheism. Persecution or even execution by lions or fire sometimes awaited those devoted to the sole Lordship of Jesus.

One of the most notable stories of martyrdom surrounds Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna around A.D. 155. Travel with me to the second century and witness his courageous faithfulness. Polycarp refused to acknowledge anyone other than Jesus as Lord. His story is powerful, and his devotion complete. Consider this paraphrase of what happened:⁸

They came after the old man, Polycarp, as if he were a common criminal, a dangerous outlaw. His friends had impressed on him the need to withdraw from the city to hide away on a small estate nearby. Passing time with the closest of friends, he prayed for fellow believers everywhere. He himself, however, had no heart for running, for he had placed his fate in the hands of God. Even the sheriff seemed a bit

embarrassed that he was coming against such an old man as if he were in hot pursuit of a hardened criminal. When they finally found Polycarp in the hideaway estate, Polycarp left his upper bed chamber to come down to speak with his vigorous captors. The arresting officers were themselves puzzled that so much ado had been made over the arrest of a harmless old man. His crime was clear: because he believed Jesus was the only Lord, he had refused to acknowledge the lordship of Caesar.

Before they took him, the old man offered them food and drink and merely asked whether they would give him an hour to pray before he went with them voluntarily. Hearing his prayers, they even silently repented that they had come after so venerable an old man. The sheriff himself tried to persuade Polycarp: "Now what harm is there in saying, 'Lord Caesar' and in cursing the Christ to save yourself? Consider your age, old man. You are making too much of this." They were wanting Polycarp to deny his Christ by acknowledging the lordship of Caesar. "Go ahead. Call Caesar Lord!" the sheriff pleaded one last time.

But the old man silenced his captors, "I have served him for eighty-six years, and he has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" With this stubborn refusal to identify anyone but Jesus as Lord, the mob shouted that he be fed to the lions. The official, however, chose instead to burn Polycarp alive at the stake. He gave his life in the flames of the fire to uphold the sole Lordship of Jesus!

Even before emperors were identified as *kurios*, the gods of the Orient and Egypt had long been called *lords*.⁹ Because people were considered personally responsible to the gods who made them, the gods were thought to intervene in the lives of humans with rewards and punishments. For example, in one ancient Babylonian psalm (*Ungnad* 220), the writer pined, "As though I did not fear my god, my goddess, so it befalls me. Sorrow, sickness, destruction, and corruption are my portion."¹⁰ Because of their perceived creative and controlling powers, the gods of the ancient world were deemed the lords of destiny and the lords of human beings.

Uses in the Old Testament

After the exile, Jews no longer permitted the pronunciation of the name Yahweh (the personal name for God).¹¹ Rather, they substituted *Adonai*, the Hebrew designation for *lord* or *sir*. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Septuagint, *Yahweh* was most often translated as “Lord” (*kurios*).

We can understand what it means to call Jesus *Lord* only when we comprehend that *Lord* is the name for God in the Old Testament. The Yahweh (in the Greek translation, *kurios*) of the Old Testament was much more than simply the Lord of the land or even of the people. With full prophetic power in mind, the Old Testament writers wanted to proclaim that their God, Yahweh, was Lord of all! For example, they called him “Lord of all the earth” (Joshua 3:11, 13; Micah 4:13; Zechariah 6:5; see also Psalm 97:5; Zech. 4:14).¹² The Old Testament God is called “Lord” because he holds power over the whole cosmos. He is both Creator and Sustainer of life. Thus, to say Yahweh is *Lord* is to summarize all of ancient Israel’s beliefs, to summarize the whole Old Testament. The God who bears the name Yahweh is above all other gods.

The reader of the New Testament should be completely awestruck by the fact that so holy a designation, *kurios*, is applied to Jesus when the writers of the New Testament use Old Testament quotations about God (*kurios*) to describe Jesus. For example, when the fiery preacher, John the Baptist, stood and proclaimed, “Make ready the way of the Lord” (Matthew 3:3), he was applying to Jesus Isaiah 40:3, a passage about Yahweh. Too, in Matthew 4:7, we have a quotation from Deuteronomy 6:16, by which Jesus rebuked his tempter by telling him, “YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.” At least secondarily, the passage makes Jesus “Lord . . . God,” for Satan was being rebuked for tempting Jesus. Remember, Satan himself never really doubted the deity of Jesus.

To sum up, *kurios* was the translation of choice for the name of God, Yahweh, in the Greek Old Testament. Therefore, Old Testament passages that referred to God could be applied easily to Jesus by Greek-speaking Christians.¹³

Uses in the New Testament

God the Father is also called *kurios* in the New Testament. For example, Jesus said, “I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth . . .” (Matt.11:25). In Revelation 4:11, moreover, the twenty-four elders fall down before God and worship him, saying, “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things. . . .”

So, in the New Testament, both God and Jesus are called *Lord*. Let’s examine the types of literature found in the New Testament to find examples of *kurios* as applied to Jesus.

The Gospels

In the Gospels, Jesus often taught in the form of stories or parables. Many times, the central figure was a *kurios*, a lord. This lord was pictured as one in authority who came to pronounce judgment. For example, in Mark 13:33–37, the *kurios* (translated “master”) of the house went on a journey and assigned certain tasks to his slaves. He appointed the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. Expecting the master’s return at any moment, the subjects were to keep up their good work. The surprise return of the *kurios* (“master”) in the story is representative of the return of Jesus the Lord at his *parousia* (Second Coming).

Jesus himself understood his ministry in terms of Lordship. In Mark 12:35–37, he quizzed the Pharisees concerning an interpretation of Psalm 110:1.¹⁴ The question was clear: *If the Messiah was to be a descendant of David, how could David call his own son his Lord?* The implied conclusion asserted the deity of Jesus: The Lord (Messiah) was a descendant of David by physical birth, but David acknowledged the Lord (Messiah) as his spiritual authority. Because Jesus identified himself as the Messiah and because the psalmist addressed the Messiah as Lord, Jesus thus recognized the title “Lord” as applicable to himself.¹⁵

Of the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), the Gospel of Luke gives special emphasis to Jesus as *ho kurios* (the Lord). New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce states that Luke referred to Jesus as “the

Lord” to remind his readers that the One about whom he was writing is now the risen and exalted Christ.¹⁶

In John’s Gospel, moreover, Thomas addressed the resurrected Christ as “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28). With such a declaration, Thomas placed Jesus in a position equal to that of God.¹⁷ The resurrection of Jesus led Thomas to make this exalted confession.¹⁸

The Book of Acts

The title “the Lord,” which Luke used in his Gospel, is combined with other names by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles.¹⁹ Jesus is called “the Lord Jesus” (Acts 1:21; 4:33), “the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 11:17), and “our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 15:26; 20:21).

In the Acts of the Apostles, the early believers were not using the word *kurios* to mean *sir* when applied to Jesus. Rather, *kurios* had developed into a confession of and commitment to the risen Christ.²⁰

The early sermons in Acts are representative of the preaching of the early church. In these sermons, we have a gospel of Lordship. For example, in Acts 2:14–36, Peter, on the Day of Pentecost, stood before the crowd in Jerusalem and proclaimed his sermon. He related Old Testament texts concerning the Messiah to the life of Jesus. Peter then made the pivotal point when he declared, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both *Lord and Christ*—this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36, italics added for emphasis). Using the same psalm that Jesus had employed to imply his Lordship, Peter made clear that Jesus not only had been crucified and resurrected but also is Lord of all (see Acts 2:34–35; Psalm 110:1).²¹

The Writings of Paul

Of all the biblical writers, Paul provides the most extensive instruction about the application of the title *Lord* to Jesus.²² Out of the more than 700 times *kurios* occurs in the New Testament, more than a third are found in Paul’s letters.²³

In 1 Corinthians 12:3, Paul set forth the two basic mindsets of humanity. He declared, “No one speaking by the Spirit of God says

‘Jesus is accursed’; and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” Those who have the insight of the Spirit of God will declare the Lordship of Jesus.

In Romans 10:9, a passage we already have considered, Paul associated Jesus’ Lordship with Jesus’ glorious resurrection. For Paul, Jesus’ Lordship was anchored in the resurrection act. Jesus’ resurrection was both historically grounded and able to deliver humankind from the ultimate enemy—death.

In this same passage (Rom. 10:9–21), Paul asserted that Lordship breaks down ethnic barriers. He declared with boldness that there was no longer any “distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call upon him; for whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:12). Salvation itself, according to Paul, is found in the acknowledgment of the Lordship of Jesus, a salvation available to both Jews and Gentiles.

Other New Testament Writings

In other New Testament books, we find the same emphasis on Lordship. James declared, “My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism” (James 2:1).

Likewise, 1 and 2 Peter make the Lordship of Jesus apparent. Peter encouraged his readers who were living in the midst of suffering and persecution to “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts” (1 Peter 3:15).

Finally, Revelation portrays Jesus as Lord of the cosmos. He is ultimately declared as “KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS” (Rev. 19:16). He is the slain and yet victorious Lamb who has taken on this wonderful name.

Early Baptists and the Lordship of Jesus

Baptist confessions of faith in the 1600s usually stated the Lordship of Christ in clear terms.²⁴ In the Somerset Baptist Confession of 1656, the Lordship of Jesus is described in terms of his offices: “our prophet; and king, lord, and law-giver”; “Prince of life”; “Prince of peace”; “Master of

his people”; “Head of his church”; “the Almighty.”²⁵ Another early Baptist confession declared in 1651 “that *Jesus Christ*, his Lordly or Kingly preeminence over all mankind, is vindicated or maintained in the Scriptures account by virtue of his dying or suffering for them.”²⁶

In seventeenth-century America, belief in the Lordship of Jesus bound scattered Baptist churches into a semblance of unity. Although the churches lacked general organization and had diverse backgrounds and leadership, they eventually formed a denominational organization because they recognized their common Lord.²⁷ Baptists throughout history have emphasized the Lordship of Jesus.

Placing emphasis on the Lordship of Jesus has shaped, at least partly, some foundational Baptist beliefs. For example, Baptists have believed in the autonomy of the local church (Baptist churches answer to no denominational authority) because each congregation is answerable only to the Lordship of Christ. Any other hierarchical arrangement would threaten the direct rule of Christ in his church. Also, emphasis on the Lordship of Christ led Baptists to realize the sole competency of the individual soul before God. Part of this conviction has been the idea that each person ought to be free to choose his or her own religion, apart from political compulsion.

Conclusion

We have seen that the early church moved quickly to centralize the confession “Jesus is Lord” as the heartbeat of its message. Whether we examine the letters of Paul to first-century churches, the historical record of Jesus’ life as recorded in the Gospels, the preaching of the Apostle Peter as recorded in Acts, the brave stance of second-century Christians like Polycarp, or even early confessions of faith penned by Baptists in the seventeenth century, the core of Christianity emerges: “Jesus is Lord!”

Surely “Jesus is Lord” is the most powerful sentence that can be uttered by human lips. To say “Jesus is Lord” is to say it all!

But what do we really mean when we utter these words? How does it change our lives to make Jesus our Lord? The next chapters will help us consider and answer these questions.