



One Page Sermon

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Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not.

“Jesus is Lord” is one of the oldest and most fundamental confessions of the Church. Translations of the word Lord are recognizable in other languages. In Hebrew, the word is “Adonai.” It is used often in the Hebrew Bible, usually to refer to God and to replace the word YHWH (Yahweh) for fear of violating the third commandment.

In Greek, the word for Lord is “Kyrie.” Most choir members or students of western music will recognize the word as a part of “Kyrie Elieson,” which means “Lord have mercy.” This is a chant that dates back over a thousand years. Gregorian Chant formed the foundation of music in Europe, and versions of “Kyrie Elieson, have been sung for centuries.

In Latin, the word for Lord is dominus. Within this word we see the roots for words like dominate, domineer, and even domino. Unfortunately, it is also in these words that we find the root of the evil that has come from calling Jesus Lord. When Christians in history of understood Jesus as the Lord who will dominate and domineer, there has been much trouble.

Paul, when describing the Lordship of Jesus in his letter to the Philippians quotes a hymn that the earliest followers of Christ sang in worship. Philippians 2:6-11

*Though he was in the form of God,
He did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.
But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings.
When he found himself in the form of a human,
He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
Even death on a cross.
Therefore, God highly honored him and gave him a name above all names,
So that at the name of Jesus everyone in heaven, on earth,
And under the earth might bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
To the glory of God the Father.*

This hymn is important because it defines the nature of Jesus lordship. Calling Jesus Lord was a very loaded phrase. It

was not simply an honorific that connected him to the Adonai of the Hebrew Bible. At the time of Paul, there was another man that called himself Lord. Kyrie was a title that was saved explicitly for the Emperor—Caesar. To say that Jesus was Lord was also to say that Caesar was not. Kyrie Christos (Lord Christ) was a statement of allegiance over and above Kyrie Caesar.

Yet Kyrie Christos was different. Lord Jesus did not use his power to exploit. He did not use it to manipulate or control. Instead, he emptied himself for the sake of compassion and love, even to the point of the most shameful death imaginable. Through his lowering himself, he was raised up. Raised up in resurrection and raised up on high.

The problem came when singers of Jesus’ Lordship hymn stopped thinking about the importance of the first part and simply focused on the second: “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” When this became “bow or else” or “confess or suffer consequences,” the Lordship of Jesus became just another earthly emperor. For far too long the Church was wedded to this perversion of the Gospel.

Under the guise of Jesus’ Lordship, much evil has been done in the world, as seen in ideas such as manifest destiny, the colonization of Africa, the genocide of Native people in North and South America, and the slave trade in America.

The Lordship of Jesus is not a lordship of coercion and force. When Paul said, “Jesus is Lord,” he meant “Jesus is Lord, not Cesar.” When far too many Christians say, “Jesus is Lord,” they mean, “Jesus is your Lord or else.”

For us, claiming that Jesus is Lord is a challenge to consider what is not our Lord. If Jesus is the ruler, if Jesus is who we confess, and if Jesus is the one to whom we bend the knee, who do we not submit to? The Lords of this world are powerful and tempting, but the Lord Christ is love.



The provocative image is the cover of the German edition of the book *Was Jesus Caesar?* by Francesco Carotta