

Freeing Jesus

Chapter 4: Lord

Why do you call me “Lord, Lord,” and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them.

—Luke 6:46-47

In college, Diana reveled in the study of the Bible and theology, reading, thinking about, and discussing the ideas of the great thinkers in the history of the church like Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth and concepts like double predestination and realized eschatology.

“In the avalanche of words, someone in class remarked. ‘Jesus can’t just be your Savior; he must also be your Lord.’ I was riveted by the idea—Lord, Master of all, a God who cared about justice and peace and things that happened here on earth. Admittedly, the Jesus I had encountered as a teenager could manage to save people from sin and death, but maybe there was more. Maybe Jesus could save the world.”

Around 112 CE the Roman governor Pliny reported to the Emperor Trajan about a new religious sect called Christians. In his efforts to learn more about this group he tortured two female slaves who were called deaconesses and told Trajan that while he had not discovered much about this new group but had learned something of the faith of these women because of their confession, “Jesus is Lord.”

Historians refer to this “as an early creedal affirmation, but it was really more of a theological slogan. At its simplest level, the Greek term *kyrios*, meaning ‘lord’ or ‘master,’ quite literally meant the one who owns you...In a world where millions were held in slavery and millions of others lived in poverty and powerlessness at the bottom of a rigid social hierarchy, claiming Jesus as ‘Lord’ announced one’s liberation from oppression.”

“Jesus is Lord” made sense in an empire of slaves as submitting to his lordship amounted to spiritual freedom, especially in the new community called the church where apparently, female slaves held leadership positions and Roman social status was upended...Everything and everyone in the Roman Empire was, however, owned by master other than Jesus. The Roman Emperor had ultimate authority, power, and control over everything. “When slaves and women said that Jesus was Lord, they surely meant that Jesus was now their master, no matter the claims of earthly masters.”

However, because Rome claimed that Caesar was Lord of all, asserting that Jesus is Lord “also carried political connotations. Especially when those who professed ‘Jesus is Lord’ also refused to say ‘Caesar is Lord.’”

In other words, “Jesus is Lord” meant far more than “Jesus is my personal master,” it also meant that Caesar “is not my master.” Early Christians moved quickly from the spiritual freedoms they acquired by following Jesus to sedition and treason against the political order.”

In addition, “Lord” or *Adonai* in the Jewish context was used in place of the name for God, YHWH, in the Hebrew Bible since that was considered too sacred to utter aloud. In the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, *kyrios* was the translation of the Hebrew *Adonai*. In other words, “Lord” became a term used to identify the living God.

“Thus, ‘Lord’ had multiple meanings in the biblical world, meanings that were personal, political, and theological, and expanded as a term to include multiple ways in which believers experienced Jesus. Writers in the New Testament use *kyrios* more than seven hundred times to refer to Jesus—making the word seem so common that contemporary readers seem to take it for granted.” Yet *kyrios* was a startling word to describe an itinerant rabbi. It signifies one who “holds dominion over the lives and fates of those under his sway.

Jesus is Lord was “subversive and empowering, a form of submission one could choose in a world of otherwise little choice, a way of life that resulted in finding oneself by giving oneself totally and unreservedly to this crucified Jewish peasant *kyrios*.

With this background in place, the chapter goes on to develop and unpack several terms and ideas that are related to the idea that Jesus is Lord: Master, Ruler, God, the Mission of God, the Kin-dom of God, and the Orderly Lord. In each case Diana introduces some the common conceptions in traditional mainline and evangelical Protestant Christianity in North American and expands on them, developing some of the ideas of scripture that are less emphasized by mainstream Christian culture.

The commitment to Jesus as Lord has raised numerous debates and controversies throughout the history of the church. What does it really mean to say that Jesus is the Lord of ones life? To truly follow his life and teaching regarding non-violence, the use of money, solidarity with the poor, marginalized, and oppressed, and the love of all people including our enemies.

Questions for Discussion

What do you think of the idea that Jesus is Lord? How do you understand this notion and what does it mean to you? Do you think of Jesus as your Lord? Why or why not?

Are you familiar with the notion that the Lordship of Jesus was viewed as seditious by the Roman Empire and a challenge to its authority? What do you think of this and what are its implications in the present?

Does it surprise you that the Christians do not have common understandings and commitments concerning the Lordship of Jesus? Why or why not? What is your response to this situation?

Diana says that she was riveted hearing by the idea that “Jesus can’t just be your Savior; he must also be your Lord.” What do you think of this? Does this make sense to you? Why or why not?

What did you learn?

What questions do you have?