

Editorial: What ‘Jesus is Lord’ means in 2024

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Spoiler alert: “Jesus is Lord” means the same thing in 2024 as it did in A.D. 33. In fact, the meaning has never changed. To say *Jesus* is Lord is to say nothing and no one else is.

But I’m not saying anything new. Rather, I’m reminding us of our core proclamation as Christians. The start of a new year is a good time for this reminder.

A little history

For the earliest Christians, proclaiming, “Jesus is Lord,” put them on a collision course with the political power of the day. When the earliest Christians proclaimed, “Jesus is Lord,” they did so consciously. They knew they were taking a provocative stand against Caesar’s proclaimed lordship.

They also knew the exclusiveness of Jesus’ lordship put them at odds with their communities religiously, socially and economically. Paul and his companions were seen as troublemakers and suffered beatings and imprisonment for proclaiming Jesus as the superior deity. Christians could be ostracized even by their own families for the same proclamation.

The situation changed for Christians in A.D. 313 when Emperor Constantine granted freedom of religion within the Roman Empire. In 380, Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the empire. Whether these were acts of true devotion to Christ or political maneuvers is debated.

Christians now enjoyed new status. The trade-off, however, was Christianity's domestication in service of the empire. Proclaiming, "Jesus is Lord," no longer was in opposition to political and religious rulers. A Christian could conform to human law without needing to conform to Christ.

Such was the case in the Western world for the next 1,500 years wherever rulers and nations called themselves "Christian." You could claim the name of Christ without the slightest bend in the knee. "Jesus is Lord" had lost its punch.

Today, despite new Constantines, Christianity largely has lost such cachet in the West. Once again, proclaiming, "Jesus is Lord," is strange, even considered oppositional. But as always, Jesus' lordship still supersedes the political, social, cultural and economic order of the day.

Jesus or the world

The order of the day holds considerable sway, however, so that we need to be conscious again of what we are saying when we say, "Jesus is Lord." Are we using the empire's coinage, or are we proclaiming our submission to Christ Jesus? What we mean will be tested and found out.

Our understanding of Jesus' unique and exclusive lordship is tested in endless ways in this world. The world—including religion—expects us to bow to a million different people and things, so long as not a single one of them is Jesus.

We can wear all the crosses we want, display all the Christian art we want, listen to all the Christian music, read all the Christian books, attend all the church services we want and still be at ease in the world, because none of these things require us to bow in worship of Jesus.

We can do all of these things and the world still accomplish its ends with us. We can say the words, “Jesus is Lord,” without once bowing in submission to Christ with our body, mind or heart.

Just as we’ve always been, we will be tempted in obvious and subtle ways in the year ahead to make just this error.

Testing grounds

Politics will be an obvious testing ground. We will be tempted to define “what Jesus would do” more by politicians and political preferences than by Jesus himself.

Culture will continue to exert enormous pressure on our allegiance to Christ, seeking to perfect materialism in us and to shape our notions of what we can and can’t do, should and shouldn’t do with our and other bodies.

How we spend time and money, how we make money, how we make decisions, how much thought we give to Jesus and his teaching will be daily tests, just as they’ve always been.

A less obvious testing ground will be our estimation of ourselves. We will be tempted to think we are more important and more valuable than others, that we come first. We likely won’t notice the test because it will seem natural. It might even seem baptized. But in whose water, in whose blood?

“Jesus is Lord” means full submission to Jesus. It means we give ourselves over to his rule and reign in our desires, thoughts and actions. Jesus’ lordship is to shape us. We do not shape it.

Likewise, Jesus is Lord at all times and in all situations. Jesus’ lordship is not a situational thing for some times, some people and some places.

Jesus is and will be Lord

Big questions loom over the year ahead. Each is a question of Jesus' lordship.

Many are wondering about the Southern Baptist Convention. Whatever happens with the SBC, Jesus is Lord. Should the SBC fully adopt the exclusion of all women pastors, disfellowship scores of churches or run out of money, it will not make Jesus any more or less Lord.

2024 is an election year, and a contentious one at that. Should 2024 be anything like 2020, Jesus' lordship will not be affected. Should Donald Trump and Joe Biden be the respective Republican and Democrat nominees for president of the United States, Jesus still will be Lord. Whoever is elected, you guessed it, Jesus is and will be Lord.

This is also true closer to home. Jesus is Lord whatever our health diagnosis, whatever our financial situation is, whatever happens in our family or at work.

That Jesus is and will be Lord regardless is not a call to apathy or resignation. Rather, because Jesus is and will be Lord whatever happens, we who proclaim his lordship must be mindful of what we are saying such that our lives are clear testimony of our allegiance to Christ and not some lesser god.

But this isn't saying anything new. Instead, it's a reminder to all of us—myself above all—that our core proclamation as Christians is *Jesus is Lord*.

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