

The Significance of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the New Testament and Its Implications for Contemporary Followers of Christ

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Abstract

This article investigates the significance of the lordship of Jesus in the New Testament (NT) and its implications for Christian living. It aims at clarifying the meaning of acknowledging Christ as Lord in the NT and to outline how this acknowledgment bears on the practical lives of contemporary followers of Christ. Drawing upon textual and historical analysis, the article is written from the postulation that leading a Christian life that reflects the demands of the lordship of Christ is contingent upon a clear understanding of the concept as delineated in Scriptures. Results show that the Christian confession of Christ's lordship has ramifications with the Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts in which it was used. The confession that "Jesus is Lord" should affect every sphere of Christian living and enable robust allegiance and total devotion to Christ.

Introduction

The lordship of Christ is a pivotal teaching of the NT. Among early followers of Christ, confessing Christ as Lord characterized their pursuit of Christ from its initial stages and permeated their whole lives. When Peter is called to follow Jesus in Luke 5:8, he responds by paying obeisance to Jesus Christ (kneeling) and confessing his lordship. Confessing Christ as Lord was also at the core of the gospel. In 1 Corinthians 4:5, Apostle Paul affirms: "For *we* do not proclaim ourselves but

Jesus Christ as *Lord*” (NET, my emphasis). This means that the proclamation of Jesus’ lordship was not only central to Paul’s preaching and other early followers of Christ (notice Paul’s use of “we” in the text), but it also constituted the core content of their gospel. This indicates the centrality of the motif of the lordship of Jesus among early Christ-followers. Contemporary Bible scholars equally attest to this centrality. Peter Feenstra (2002), for instance, maintains that the doctrine of Christ’ lordship that interweaves the fabric of NT preaching is a “foundational truth of the Christian faith” (para. 1). Charlie Bling (2024) argues that the “lordship ... of Jesus Christ is essential to our salvation” (para. 4). According to John MacArthur (2008), the affirmation of Christ’s lordship is the “single, central, foundational, and distinguishing article of Christianity” (p. 28).

Despite this pivotality, the teaching of Scriptures on Christ’s lordship and its bearing on Christian life are not always understood among contemporary Christians let alone translated into their lifestyles. This lack of understanding may result from factors such as sheer neglect or a deemphasis of the theme of Christ’s lordship. According to Jerry Vines (2008), the “most neglected truth in the Bible today may be the Lordship of Jesus Christ” (para. 1). MacArthur (2008) indicts evangelicals for their de-emphasis of the lordship of Christ, decrying the pervasiveness of no-lordship doctrines in their ranks (p. 28).

This paper aims at elucidating the meaning of the confession “Jesus is Lord” and sketch out its implications for contemporary Christian living. The paper proposes answers to the questions “What is the significance of acknowledging Christ’s lordship in the NT?” and “How might this acknowledgement bear on the practical lives of followers of Jesus today?” It builds on the postulate that leading a life that conforms with the demands of acknowledging Christ’s lordship is predicated upon a clear understanding of what it means and its repercussions on practical Christian living. The paper revolves around five points. The first point examines the basic

meaning of *kurios* and its variegated uses in the NT. The second point studies the centrality of the confession of Christ's lordship amongst early Christians. The third point explores the Greco-Roman and Jewish background to the use of *kurios* among early Christ-followers. The fourth point surveys the political overtones of the use of *kurios* associated with the gospel of Caesar and their incidence on the Christian confession of Christ's lordship in the Roman context. The final point discusses the importance and implications of confessing Christ as Lord today.

Basic Meaning of *Kurios* and Multiple NT Uses

With over 700 occurrences, the Greek word *kurios* (*kyrios*) which is predominantly translated as "lord" pervades the NT. The term is used in the NT with several meanings depending on referents and contexts. *Kurios* is used to refer to or address persons in diverse socially superior statuses such as slave owners, wealthy landowners, or masters (Ephesians 6:5, 9). In some contexts, *kurios* designates an unknown male to whom a polite address is intended. This is the case in John 4:11 where the Samaritan woman addresses Jesus as *kurios*. When used in this sense, English translators frequently opt for the word "Sir" to render the term. In some texts, *kurios* designates an angel (see, Acts 10:4). In sync with the religious language of the time, *kurios* is further employed in the NT as a "reverential epithet given to deities" such as lord Serapis, lord Zeus, etc. (Hurtado, 2003, p. 108; also see Harris, 1999, p. 88 and Moore, 2024, paras. 8-9). It is in this light that Paul derisively talks of many so-called gods and lords in 1 Corinthians 8:5. NT authors also used *kurios* in association with several referents within the Godhead: God the Father (Matthew 11:25; Acts 17:24); Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 19:31; Romans 10:9; 2 Corinthians 4:5); and the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:16-18). Often, *kurios* in the NT appears in quotations/references from the OT where the tetragrammaton (the Hebrew divine name יהוה, YHWH) is used. Some examples of this usage may be found in Matthew 4:7 and Acts 15:17.

When it is associated with Jesus of Nazareth, *kurios* is a key Christological title in the NT that shows up over 600 times. The use of *kurios* in relation to Jesus Christ is by far the most prevalent in the NT. Besides the weight of its numerical occurrence, *kurios*, when it appears in conjunction with Jesus Christ, emphasizes a motif that is crucial to NT Christology. According to Gordon Fee (2018), the phrase “Jesus is Lord” is the “most significant of the christological motifs in Paul’s letters” and constitutes the “absolute heart of his Christology” (p. 117). As will be highlighted later, when *kurios* is used with Jesus of Nazareth in view, it conveys the sense of his absolute dominion, supreme authority, undisputed rulership, unrestricted kingship, and unquestioned dominion as the cosmic and eternal suzerain who is of “peerless status” (Bjork, 2021, p. 139). This explains why, in the NT, the confession of the lordship of Jesus was a crucial response to gospel and the mainstay of the Christian life in general.

The Centrality of the Confession of Christ’s Lordship in Early Christianity

The confession of Christ’s lordship is central to apostolic teachings in the NT and early church fathers. Among early disciples of Christ, the public acknowledgement of Jesus Christ and the pledge of submission to him as Lord was vital in becoming his follower and receiving the salvation that he offers. In this respect, Paul declares in Romans 10:9 that “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (NET). It is the same confession of Christ’s lordship that Paul requested from the Roman jailer at Philippi in Acts 19:31 when he declared: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” This confession perfectly aligns with the gospel Paul preached as outlined in 2 Corinthians 4:5: “For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord” (NIV) and the message Peter proclaimed in Acts 2:36, insisting that Jesus Christ whom the Jews crucified was made “both Lord and Messiah” (NIV). It also aligns with the purpose for which Jesus was exalted and

received a name above all names in order that, at the mention of his name, every knee bows “in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge[s] that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11, NIV). This confession was also preponderant among early Church fathers. Second century Bishop of Lyon, Irenaeus (c. 120-200) confesses that “Jesus Christ is our Lord and God” (*Against Heresies* 1:10:1, cited in Brom, 2004, para. 15), affirming that “what cannot be said of anyone else who ever lived” was said of Jesus Christ who is “himself in his own right God and Lord” (*Against Heresies* 3:19:1, cited in Brom, 2004, para. 16). It follows that, for early followers of Christ, acknowledging that “Jesus is Lord” was the keystone of the gospel, the irreducible and foremost confession of Christian faith (Bill, 2010), and the primary confession of those who decided to come after Christ (Fee, 2018, p. 118).

The Greco-Roman and Jewish Background to the Use of *Kurios* in Early Christianity: The Fourfold Application of *Kurios* to Jesus Christ

When applied to Jesus Christ, *kurios* communicates variegated meanings that showcase his absolute royalty, supreme authority, and sovereign divinity. William Barclay (1998) explains that, used with Jesus of Nazareth in mind, *kurios* expresses the following different but closely related ideas: (1) absolute ownership, (2) absolute mastery, (3) absolute royalty, and (4) absolute deity (pp. 51-54).

As an expression of *absolute ownership*, *kurios* “describes the kind of ownership which gives a man the absolute right to do as he likes with what he possesses” (Barclay, 1998, p. 51). The word is used in this sense with regard to the owner (lord) of the vineyard (Matthew 21:40) and the owner (lord) of a colt (Luke 19:33). Viewed from this angle, a person who comes under the lordship of Christ fully “belongs to Christ, and Christ has the right to do with him as he likes” (Barclay, 1998, p. 51).

As an expression of *absolute mastery*, *kurios* indicates the authority that a master had over a slave. As Barclay (1998) explains, “it is the word for master as opposed to slave” which “describes he who has the right to exercise absolute control and to demand absolute obedience” (Barclay, 1998, p. 52). *Kurios* is used in this sense in Matthew 6:24 where Jesus rightly observes that “no one can serve two masters [*kurioi*]” since a *kurios* demands absolute loyalty. In this light, true followers of Jesus – those who have truly submitted to his lordship, can never again do what they like. They “must always do what Jesus likes” (Barclay, 1998, p. 52).

As an expression of *absolute royalty*, *kurios* highlights ultimate kingship – the authority for utter rule over a people and territory. *Kurios* was the word for imperial power, which “by the end of the first century had become the normal title of the reigning Roman Emperor” (Barclay, 1998, p. 53; cf. Goheen, 2015, Loc. 134; Brown, 2000, p. 51). In the NT world, given its association with the Roman emperor, *kurios* embodied supreme royal dominion. In *kurios*, “the highest power the world knew was summed up” (Barclay, 1998, p. 53). The fact that early Christians proclaimed that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, was *Kurios* (a title associated with the Roman Emperor), did not only associate political connotations to their proclamation resulting in their vicious persecution from the Romans Empire (Brown, 2000, p. 51), but it also had massive implications for Christ’s followers.

As a result of Jesus Christ being *kurios*, King, those who would follow him would need to fully surrender and pledge (swear) loyalty to him. Because Jesus Christ is Lord, Barclay (1998) emphasizes that, “We do not make terms with Christ; we surrender to Christ. We do not compromise with Christ; we submit to Christ. Christianity does not mean being interested in Jesus Christ; it means taking the same oath [of total loyalty] as princes take to the king or the queen in a coronation ceremony...” (p. 53). To become a Christian, surrendering to Christ’s royalty is similar to the *sacramentum* which, in the

Roman Empire, was “a soldier’s oath of loyalty” (Barclay, 1998, p. 54). This implies that, a Christian is one who, having surrendered to the lordship of Christ, “has sworn loyalty and keeps loyalty to Christ the King” (Barclay, 1998, p. 54).

As an expression of *absolute deity*, *kurios* indicates that Jesus is the sovereign God – the YHWH of the OT. In the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT, YHWH, the name of God, is consistently translated as *kurios*. *Kurios* therefore “could serve to designate God, and functioned as a Greek substitute for God’s name” (Hurtado, 2003, p. 112). In this sense, to “call Jesus Lord, is to say that human categories are too small to contain him, and to affirm our faith that nothing less will do than to say God was in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19)” (Barclay, 1998, p. 54). As YHWH dwelled in a tabernacle to fellowship with Israel, His people, so has He dwelled with us in the Lord Jesus when he became flesh and “tabernacled” with us (John 1:14). In this light, to confess that Jesus is Lord is to “affirm that we believe that in Jesus Christ we are in the presence of God” (Barclay, 1998, p. 54).¹

As demonstrated above, *kurios* is a regal language denoting absolute rulership, control, and dominion. Therefore, to affirm Jesus’ lordship is to affirm his unequivocal and unconditional dominion over his people and the universe. William Barclay

¹Besides the fact that Jesus appropriates the title *Kurios* (see John 13:13), NT authors intentionally apply to Jesus OT passages that originally emphasized the lordship of God. Paul is a typical example of this practice. Hurtado (2003) explains: “[I]t is remarkable that, in other citations of Old Testament passages which originally have to do with God, Paul applies the passages to Jesus, making him the *Kyrios*: Romans 10:13 (Joel 2:32), 1 Corinthians 1:31 (Jer. 9:23-24), 1 Corinthians 10:26 (Ps. 24:1), 2 Corinthians 10:17 (Jer. 9:23-24). ... There are also a number of cases where Paul alludes to Old Testament passages that mention Yahweh as the *Kyrios* and Paul clearly makes Jesus the referent: 1 Corinthians 10:21 (Mai. 1:7,12), 1 Corinthians 10:22 (Deut. 32:21), 2 Corinthians 3:16 (Exod. 34:34), 1 Thessalonians 3:13 (Zech. 14:5), 1 Thessalonians 4:6 (Ps. 94:2). But the most striking example of this is surely Philippians 2:10-11, which appropriates Isaiah 45:23-25 (originally proclaiming a universal submission to God) to portray the eschatological acclamation of Jesus as *Kyrios*” (p. 112).

(1998) magisterially summarizes what it means to confess that Jesus is Lord:

To call Jesus Lord is to affirm that he is our *absolute owner*, and to confess that we must give him our *absolute obedience*. To call Jesus Lord is to affirm that he is our *absolute master*, and to confess that we must give him *absolute submission*. To call Jesus Lord is to affirm that he is our *absolute king*, and to confess that we must give him *absolute loyalty*. To call Jesus Lord is to affirm his *absolute deity*, and to confess that we must give him *absolute reverence*" (p. 54; emphasis in the original).

It follows that when early followers of Christ called Jesus Lord, they were not looking at him as a fellow human being of a superior social position to whom they were showing respect. By acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord, especially Lord of lords (Revelation 17:14; 19:16) or "Lord of all" (1 Peter 2:17), and preaching his lordship, they were making a strong claim. They were claiming that Jesus Christ was the sovereign monarch and ultimate authority of the universe. This claim resonated variously with different depositaries of power of the time. To owners of whatever sort, this meant that Christ was the undisputed proprietor of the earth and everything therein. They were to recognize him as such and respond to him in unquestioned obedience. To masters of slaves, it meant that he had unrestricted authority over every life (masters and slaves included) and demanded unflinching submission from them. For Roman citizens, it implied that their emperors, although monarchs of the world power of the time, were nowhere near Christ's sovereign rule. Both Romans citizens and their rulers were to pay allegiance to him (a claim that was both offensive and insurrectional for Rome). Finally, to worshippers of other deities such as Zeus, Serapis, and others, this claim was a challenge that served a worldwide demotion verdict to their gods. In the face of Christ who is Lord, all other gods paled out and were exposed as fraudsters, false gods, or simply portals to

demonic entities. Even to Jews who adhere to the teachings of the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible), the claim that Jesus was Lord, that is, equated to the YHWH of the OT, was both scandalous and blasphemous.

This claim to Jesus Christ's universal dominion is akin to the claim early followers of Christ made whenever they identified the Lord Jesus as Jesus Christ. According to Bates (2023), calling him Christ was a claim to his universal kingship as God promised Davidic messiah and not another name given to him (Loc. 224-243). For more details on Christ being a claim, not a name, see Bates, 2023, Loc. 224-282).

The Political Overtone of the Use of *Kurios* associated with the Gospel of Caesar and Its Bearing on the Christian Confession of the Lordship of Jesus in the Roman Context

This section builds on two points. The first point explores the place of Caesar as *kurios* in the gospel of Caesar and the imperial cult. The second point highlights what allegiance to the Lord Jesus meant when examined on the backdrop of allegiance to Caesar.

Caesar as *Kurios* in the Gospel of Caesar and the Imperial Cult

In the NT era, the term lord, as indicated earlier, was charged with a heavy political significance. *Kurios* (Latin, *dominus*), *soter* (savior), *son of God* and *basileus* (king) were favored terms Roman emperors used (Bates, 2017, p. 87; Dart, 2005; Winn, 2016, p. 6). Residents of the Roman Empire were familiar with these titles and “knew them as references to the authority and divinity of the emperors, beginning notably with Caesar Augustus before the dawn of the first century” (Dart, 2005, cf. Hurtado, 2003, p. 108). These politically-pregnant terms were central to the gospel according to Caesar that was in vogue in the Roman Empire.

The gospel according to Caesar had two key dimensions. First, it “presented the emperor as god, savior, and lord” (Nystrom, 2013, Loc. 547; also see Laan, 2017). Accordingly, it deified the Roman emperor. Second, it emphasized the achievements and legacy of the emperor. In the case of Augustus, for example, these achievements were recorded in the *Res Gestae* (things done), a document that catalogued his life and legacy (Nystrom, 2013, Loc. 484). The gospel according to Caesar urged the people to place faith (*pistis* or *fides*) in their ‘lord,’ the emperor, whose vocation was to preserve peace in the empire and increase the wealth of its citizens (Dart, 2005). In a nutshell, this gospel proclaimed the divinity of Caesar as the guarantor of peace, security, and prosperity for the inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world and his legacy. As Diehl (2013) clarifies, “To Roman citizens the language of ‘good news’ and ‘glad tidings’ functioned as announcements of important events concerning the divine ruler of the empire, such as a birth, an enthronement, speeches or decrees, or news of military victory. Such imperial announcements were aimed at reassuring the colonized people” (Loc. 1128; also see Bill, 2010).

As a result of the deification of Caesar and the celebration of his divine saving acts, the gospel of Caesar engendered the worship of Caesar – a practice that has been described as the Emperor or imperial cult. The cult rose to prominence early in the reign of Caesar Augustus (Nystrom, 2013, Loc. 547). It was set in motion when, after the assassination of Julius Caesar (the adoptive father of Augustus) in 44 BC, the Roman Senate, under the influence of Augustus, recognized Emperor Julius as *divus Julius* (divine Julius) as well as *dominus* and *deus* (lord and god) and the then ruling authorities inaugurated the customs associated with imperial worship (Nystrom, 2013, Loc. 534; Diehl, 2013, Loc. 674; Moore, 2024, para. 4). The deification of Julius Caesar automatically conferred the title *divi filius* (son of the divine) to Augustus, the title by which he was worshiped during his lifetime (Nystrom, 2013, Loc. 534). From that time on, divine honors began flooding in. By 36 BC, several Italian cities granted him space in their temples adding

him to the pantheon of their deities and worshiped him; by 30 BC, his birthday became a public holiday and worship performed through pouring libations and honor to Augustus at meals was ascribed to him on that day; and by 27 BC, the emperor's genius was associated with the name of Roman gods such as *Jupiter* and *Di Penates* (Nystrom, 2013, Loc. 534). Most emperors who immediately succeeded Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus, namely, emperors Tiberius (14-37 AD), Gaius (37-41 AD), Claudius (41-54 AD), and Nero (54-68 AD), more or less, followed in the steps of their predecessors, consolidating imperial worship over the people of Rome as well as their vassals.

Essentially, the imperial cult propagated the ideology of a deified emperor worthy of worship, and recognized the blessings of the gods on the emperor and the empire (Nystrom, 2013, Loc. 547; Diehl, 2013, Loc. 735). The imperial worship took place in impressive temples located in prominent places. For instance, Caesar's temple in Athens was erected in the Acropolis while the one Herod the Great stood over the harbor of Caesarea where it dominated the town (Strait, 2013, Loc. 2554; Nystrom, 2013, Loc. 547).

These temples harbored the statues of the Roman Emperor and were meant to enhance his worship. Drew Strait (2013) explains that in Caesarea, for example, Caesar Augustus statue alongside his temple were so imposing that they could be seen by sailors several miles away (Loc. 2554). The imperial cult also involved ritual worship, the burning of incense, altars and sacrifices (Diehl, 2013, Loc. 735; Nystrom, 2013, Loc. 547). Sacrifices served a dual purpose. First, they were intended to honor Caesar to whom was given *caelestes honores* (heavenly honors) worthy of the gods; and, second, they were an "expression of submission to the emperor by his devoted, loyal subjects" (Diehl, 2013, Loc. 735). It follows that, although the imperial cult was in general not imposed except in few instances (Nystrom, 2013, Loc. 547), its definite objective was to cause Roman citizens to swear allegiance to lord Caesar and, from

that point on, live in total, committed, loyal, and practical allegiance to him.

Allegiance to the Lord Jesus against the Backdrop of Allegiance to lord Caesar

It is in this political context and against the backdrop of the imperial cult that demanded allegiance to Caesar that Christians were to express allegiance to their new-found Lord Jesus. It is self-evident that, professing allegiance to another “Lord” (Jesus Christ) different from lord Caesar in this context was indeed daunting. Although, “Christians were generally cautious, law-abiding citizens within the empire, their bold devotion to Jesus Christ as Lord and King put them in grave danger with the authorities” (Diehl, 2013, Loc. 772). Because this devotion to Christ expressed their total surrender and pledge of loyalty to the Hebrew Messiah, Jesus, and often meant refusing to swear by Caesar’s genius or refusing to pay allegiance to him if doing so compromised their allegiance to Christ, “Roman officials viewed Christ as a rival monarch, a king in direct conflict with the dictatorship of the emperor” (Diehl, 2013, Loc. 760). As a result, in general, Christians were “subjected to both scrutiny and sanction” (Diehl, 2013, Loc. 750; Bill, 2010).

From this perspective, confessing Jesus Christ as Lord was a risky and dangerous venture because it implicitly harbored political overtones which could be misconstrued as subversive (Winn, 2016, p. 6; Glasser, 2003, p. 267; Moore, 2024, para. 12) and end up in persecution, imprisonment, and, in worst cases, death. Such was the case because acknowledging the lordship of Christ was viewed as pledging loyalty to a rival ruler to Caesar. Roman authorities took note of this confession of loyalty to Christ’s lordship with intentional seriousness. This explains why, if a Christian intended to recant and prove to the Roman rulers that he or she had denied loyalty to Christ, it was expected that the person offers a “sacrifice in the presence of a statue of the Emperor while saying ‘Caesar is Lord’” (Bates,

2017, p. 87). This act “was understood in such contexts as incompatible with the sworn confession ‘Jesus is Lord’” (Bates, 2017, p. 87) but was necessary to demonstrate new allegiance to the Roman Emperor. It also showed that, Roman authorities “certainly understood that allegiance to Jesus as a sovereign was more fundamental to Christianity than anything else, even if it is not readily recognized today” (Bates, 2017, p. 88). A detailed description of the process of renouncing the lordship of Jesus Christ and pledging allegiance to Caesar as lord is found in a letter of Pliny to Emperor Trojan written approximately in AD 112 (see Bates, 2017, pp. 87-88).

Against the canvas of the imperial cult, the confession of Jesus the Christ as “Lord” took a critical significance among early Christ-followers in that it marked a shift of their loyalty or a transfer of their allegiance from Caesar (and other deities) to Jesus Christ. Further complicating this shift/transfer was the fact that they co-opted the language of the Roman Empire (the Roman imperial terminology) to express key elements of the gospel and their allegiance to Christ. That is, that they adopted, domesticated, or diverted the use of words and concepts originally employed in association with Roman emperors to express loyalty to a competing ruling Lord – Jesus Christ, and to subscribe to his eschatological vision rather than that of Caesar (Winn, 2016, p. 6). Consequently, much of the “language that is both prominent and commonplace in the New Testament is equally so in the roman imperial world” (Winn, 2016, p. 6). Included in this co-opted language are terms such as *euaggelion* (gospel) that was “used specifically of the word that goes out from Caesar proclaiming the good news that Rome is triumphant, civilization is restored, a new Caesar has ascended to the throne, or some such” (Bill, 2010); the *parousia* which brought to mind the “returning victorious Roman army, parading into the city” (Diehl, 2013, Loc. 1115) or the coming of an emperor or his official envoy to a city that forced the city “into a state of urgent preparation for his arrival” (Bill, 2010); and *pistis*, that denoted the “belief, trust, fidelity, loyalty ... not merely an intellectual affirmation of a truth, but deep-abiding

dependence on something and tenacious loyalty to it” that Roman citizens and soldiers placed in Caesar (Bill, 2010). Other such words are *apostolos* (apostle), ambassador, *ekklesia*, *dikaosoune*, etc. (for further explanations, see Winn, 2016, p. 7, and Bill 2010).

Prominent among the co-opted terms frequently applied to Jesus Christ, were such titles as “son of God” (*houios tou theou* or *divi filius* in Latin), “savior” (*soter*), “king” (*basileus*), and “lord” (*kurios*) that were ordinarily ascribed to Roman emperors (Winn, 2016, p. 6). The use of the co-opted titles, more especially that of “king” or “lord” (which are relevant for the present study) and their application to Jesus Christ could be heard by Romans as a challenge to Caesar’s authority, or a suggestion that Caesar is not lord. However, in my perspective, the application of these Roman imperial terms to Jesus did not necessarily mean that early Christians unconditionally refused to submit to the kingship of Caesar. Rather, it did mean that, although transient kingship could be conceded to Caesar, and, as such, honors and obedience given to him (cf. Romans 13: 1-5 and 1 Peter 2:17), Jesus was Lord of lords and King of kings or “Lord of all” as Peter emphatically states in his sermon in Caesarea (Acts 10:36.). This also would mean that early Christ-followers did not understand the authority of the Lord Jesus and that of Caesar in terms of power polarity. Instead, Christ’s authority, kingship, and lordship were so exalted above that of Roman emperors that “next to Jesus ‘the Lord of all,’ Caesar [was], at best, demoted to a subordinate role” (Pinter, 2013, Loc. 2123).

Therefore, Christ-followers’ ultimate loyalty and allegiance was to be ascribed to Christ, not Caesar. Such a posture, undoubtedly, was a potential source of tension. And, as expected, countless Christ-followers ran into conflict with imperial authorities whenever Roman rulers demanded allegiance from them that traded off their loyalty to the Lord Jesus. Church history has it recorded that multitudes of Christians such as Ignatius (37-107 AD), Bishop of Antioch,

met with death because Roman authorities demanded that he gives up his loyalty to Christ as Lord and shifts it to Caesar. This episode is in sync with the witness of Tacitus, the famous Roman historian, who “described how Christians who refused to proclaim ‘Caesar is Lord’ were subjected to cruel punishment (Moore, 2024, para. 14).

Importance and Implications of Confessing Christ’s Lordship Today

According to John MacArthur (2008), whether among early followers of Christ or now, “Jesus is Lord” is “the first essential confession of faith every true Christian must make” (p. 28). The confession is foundational in that it marks a *transfer of allegiance* to Christ from whatever lord a person served prior to conversion. By transfer of allegiance, I mean a complete reorientation of a person’s loyalty towards Christ at the moment that person comes under Christ’s lordship and throughout his or her life. The transfer begins with a *total loyalty shift* that removes an individual’s allegiance from a relationship or sets of relationships that, in some ways, compete with Christ’s place in the life of that individual. From this perspective, the concept of transfer of allegiance incorporates both the notion of the repudiation of former allegiances that rival allegiance to Christ and that of a solemn affirmation of loyalty to Christ. Until this transfer of allegiance has occurred, no true conversion has taken place. In this light, contemporary Christ-followers need to recover and re-appropriate the significance of acknowledging Christ’s lordship as a decisive response to the gospel, because, inherent to this acknowledgment, is the call to follow Jesus Christ, in absolute commitment, total loyalty, and unreserved surrender. Today’s Christ-followers need to awaken to the truth that, when the Lord Jesus “called people to follow Him, He was not seeking companions to be His ... admirers whom He could entertain with miracles. He was calling people to yield completely and unreservedly to His lordship” (MacArthur, 2008, p. 28).

This fact explains why Jesus kept his lordship at the center of his ministry. In John 13:13, for instance, he designated himself as *kurios*: “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am.” For the Lord Jesus, his identity as *kurios* required that his followers understand his authority as Master and obey his instructions. That is why he frowned at those who paid him *lip* homage, not *life* homage, and reprimanded those who gave him verbal lordship confession without practical obedience. Luke 6:46 states this with utmost gravity: “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not *do* what I say?” The verse shows that acknowledging Christ’s lordship transcends mere talk and demands absolute commitment, total obedience, and unconditional surrender to Christ – what Harris (1999) identifies as complete devotion to Christ (p. 143). Complete devotion to Christ, according to Murray (1999), incorporates three central components: (1) humble submission to Christ, (2) unquestionable obedience to his will, and (3) an exclusive preoccupation with pleasing him (p. 143).

Recognizing Christ’s lordship should translate in complete devotion to Christ because confessing Christ as Lord “is not possible apart from the acknowledgment that one resides in the sphere of his sovereign power and is bound over to his service” (Furnish, cited in Garlington, 1990, p. 211). A person, through the confession of Christ as Lord, comes into the sphere of his sovereign power from initial conversion and must remain there through the same committed surrender. In essence, this means that acknowledging Christ as Lord is bowing to him as “Lord of the whole life” since the “lordship of Jesus cannot be confined to an initial decision where one submits to his lordship” (Schreiner, 2001, p. 173). The fact that “Paul often appeals to the lordship of Jesus in his exhortations, [shows] that the lordship of Jesus carries through all of life” (Schreiner, 2001, p. 173).

Viewed from this angle, removing Christ’s lordship from the gospel by neglect or deemphasis as visible in Christianity nowadays, has the undeniable effect of seriously denaturing the

gospel. MacArthur (2008) is correct in observing that “You cannot remove the lordship of Christ from the gospel message without undermining faith at its core” (p. 28). It is therefore urgent to restore the lordship of Jesus of Nazareth as a paramount component of contemporary Christian proclamation and keep it at the center of Christian ministry and living. Without a deliberate centering on Christ and his lordship, there is the lurking danger that today’s Christianity will sink deeper into the quagmire of nominalism. This nominalism is already so pervasive especially among evangelicals that curbing it is a matter of emergency. To this end, it is vital to counter the influence of no-lordship doctrines that have toned down the implications of discipleship and left many with the impression that becoming a Christian is merely an issue of securing salvation through an intellectual assent and a verbal confession of Christ devoid of a life of full surrender and committed obedience to the Lord Jesus. MacArthur (2008) expresses this perspective magisterially:

The belief that someone could be a true Christian while that person’s whole lifestyle, value system, speech, and attitude are marked by a stubborn refusal to surrender to Christ as Lord is a notion that shouldn’t even need to be refuted. It is an idea you will never find in any credible volume of Christian doctrine or devotion from the time of the earliest church fathers through the era of the Protestant Reformation and for at least three and a half centuries beyond that. The now-pervasive influence of the no-lordship doctrine among evangelicals reflects the shallowness and spiritual poverty of the contemporary evangelical movement. It is also doubtless one of the main causes for evangelicalism’s impoverishment. (p. 28)

Recognizing the centrality of the lordship of Christ and submitting to that lordship has significant implications for contemporary Christian living. These implications have the potential to totally reconfigure the life of individuals who come to Christ. For today's followers, among others, surrendering to the lordship of Jesus Christ means the following:

- *Giving absolute obedience to Jesus Christ from the recognition that, as Lord, he is the absolute owner of their lives.* This means that Christ's followers must surrender all personal rights to Jesus Christ as he becomes to sole and uncontested proprietor of their lives. This should translate in practical (enacted) obedience to Jesus Christ in every aspect of Christian living. That is, a person who comes under Jesus' lordship must obey him anytime, anywhere, in every circumstance, and at any cost.
- *Giving Jesus Christ absolute submission from the recognition that, as Lord, he is their absolute master.* In the same way slaves of old gave unrestricted submission to their masters because they (slaves) belong to them (masters), so should true followers of Christ. Coming under Christ's lordship is becoming a voluntary slave of Christ out of unreserved love for him. This voluntary personal offering to Christ as a bond slave finds expression in utter capitulation of one's will for Christ's will and a total yielding of one's life for Christ's life to be made visible.
- *Giving Jesus Christ absolute allegiance from the recognition that, as Lord, he is the absolute king of their lives.* This entails that those who accept Christ as Lord must give him the prerogative of kingship over their lives. They must allow him the latitude for utter rule, sovereign control, and utmost guidance in their lives. From the moment they accept Christ and

access his kingdom as subjects of that kingdom, they must allow Christ's unrestricted reign to comprehensively affect every detail of their lives. Because they recognize him as their undisputed monarch, they owe him undisputed loyalty. Like Roman soldiers took a *sacramentum* (an oath of utmost loyalty to Caesar even at the cost of their lives), those who come under the lordship of Jesus must also swear uncontested allegiance to him.

- *Giving Jesus Christ absolute reverence from the recognition that, as Lord, he is the absolute God, the YHWH of the OT.* This is the way NT authors perceived him. As such, Jesus Christ is more than a human. He is the God who tabernacled among humans. Although he condescended, taking human likeness in his incarnation, he transcends human categories. Anyone in his presence stands in the very presence of God and should tremble at his awe-inspiring divine majesty. This should stimulate in Christ-followers the reverence due his name and the utmost surrender that comes with it.
- *Transferring allegiance to Christ from the recognition that, as Lord, no other allegiance in their lives should compete with one that is attributed to him.* As noted already, this transfer is contingent upon an ultimate shift of loyalty from any allegiance that conflicts with allegiance to Christ and a reorientation of that allegiance towards Christ. From this outlook, coming under Christ's lordship must engender, on the one hand, the severing of some social ties; a redirection of spiritual allegiances, a renunciation of carnal, sinful, and worldly gratifications; a denial of self, etc., and, on the other hand, a complete surrender of every component of personhood (intellect, volition, feelings) to Christ's control as evidence of total devotion to him.

- *Redefining/repositioning every dimension (inner as well as outer dimensions) of life to the reality of Christ lordship so that these dimensions conform to the exigencies of their confession that “Christ is Lord.”* This means that accepting Christ as Lord must trigger a total recast of life. The lives of those who surrender to Christ can never remain the same if their surrender is genuine and total. Coming under Christ’s lordship must produce a profound shift in the worldviews, belief systems, relationships, values, interests, pursuits, and lifestyles of those who decide to follow him. The relation that followers of Christ had with the the above features must change; must be adjusted; or must be altered in the light of the exigencies that come with knowing Christ as Lord.

Conclusion

This article clarified the meaning of acknowledging Christ as Lord in the NT and outlined how this acknowledgment bears on the practical lives of contemporary followers of Christ. In the article, I have attempted to show that approaching the confession of Christ’s lordship from its Greco-Roman and Jewish backgrounds throws light on the demands of unreserved allegiance and total devotion that comes with that confession.

Although the Scriptural truth about the pivotal place of acknowledging Christ as Lord has, in many ways, been neglected, de-emphasized, and even peripheralized in today’s Christianity (especially among evangelicals), there is an urgent need to recover it. This recovery is urgent in that Christ’s lordship is central to Christianity and becoming a follower of Christ unequivocally means coming under his sovereign reign and responding to that reign in absolute obedience, submission, allegiance, and reverence. It entails allowing his unrestricted dominion to bear in every compartment of the lives of Christ’s followers such that they routinely obey Christ in every way, showing him unreserved loyalty. To curb the deepening impact of the contemporary cheap-grace Christianity

and the nominalism it has provoked, rediscovering the centrality of Christ's lordship and conforming Christian living accordingly is imperative.

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