

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Part of the Movement

Exodus 19.1-6; 2 Corinthians 4.5-12

Russ Dean, September 7, 2008



In his enormously popular best-seller, *The Shack* (which gets mixed reviews in my reading of it), William P. Young has his main character encounter God, in all of God's three-in-one splendor, and confusion, in an old run down shack in the remote reaches of America's North West. In the aftermath of the death of his young daughter, Mackenzie Phillips' surprising meeting with the Holy One comes over a soul-searching weekend. Though the book has not ascended to the top of my recommended reading list, as it has for a number of reviewers, there are some very good moments. One of the best, for me, was a conversation between Mack and a modern-day Jesus, who was always clad (a little too "cheesily" for my tastes) in denim overalls, and who always smelled (a little too expectedly) of wood shavings and sawdust. In one powerful scene, though, Carpenter Jesus is talking about faith to Mack, who suddenly thinks the light has come one, and says to Jesus, "Oh... you're talking now about being Christian, aren't you?" Jesus delightfully replies, "Who said anything about being Christian? I'm not a Christian..."

Of course he was not. And if Young's readers can get beyond any misguided offense at his Jesus' crass comment, they will know that he is right. Jesus never was a Christian, and neither were his followers, at least for the first decade or more after Jesus' death. It may be the worst thing that ever happened to Jesus' movement, that in ancient Antioch, they ceased to be called "Followers of the Way," and become known, instead, as "Christians."¹

¹ Antioch of Syria was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. After the stoning of Stephen, the "Followers of the Way" scattered for their safety, some landing in Antioch and establishing a church there. Later, Barnabas, the traveling companion of Paul, was sent to the church to support them. Acts 11.26 notes, "*it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians.'*" Though I am proud to be a follower of Jesus, I am not always proud these days to be called a "Christian." I wonder what Jesus would think of the way we have used his title? A friend of mine, who is quite conservative in his theology, and who has committed his life to the endeavor of evangelizing the world for Jesus Christ, told me several years ago that he seldom uses the title, Christian, any more, especially when he is traveling in other nations -- because of the "political implications of the word." He now refers to himself as a "Christ-Follower."

I wonder how much their changed name had to do with their changing understanding of the first title by which Jesus was known. Because of the way it is used in several places in our New Testament (including in today's text), and due to other historical and literary indications, we know that the earliest baptismal confession was a three-word affirmation of faith. In some variation of a baptismal liturgy the minister of a first-century church in that Middle Eastern world would say, "State your faith." To which the candidate was to respond: "Jesus is Lord."

But what did they mean by "Lord"? And what do you mean?

It is clear from our gospels that Jesus did not invite anyone to become a member of his new religion. Jesus was a Jew, and there is no indication that he sought to break from his Judaism. Reform it, yes. Revolutionize it, perhaps. But leave it, personally, no.² In fact, Jesus' invitations were often not "religious" at all. Jesus' unorthodox religiosity was a constant source of tension, a tension that eventually cost him his life. Jesus' invitation was never doctrinal (memorize the "four spiritual laws," and see me in the morning!) He never required anyone to catch up on their pledge to the Temple before they could join. (Don't get any ideas – Jesus I'm not!) There were no catechism classes or ordination exams for his disciples. Just a simple call:

Follow me (see Mark 1.17 and parallels in the other gospels).

And they did. They did! They left their homes and their families. They left their fishing nets and their auditor's pads – because he was charismatic and challenging, exciting and just a little bit odd. He had different ideas about things. Perhaps they were discouraged by the piety of a self-righteous religious elite within their Jewish community, and Jesus' ideas were an exciting new look at a sometimes too-familiar subject. On the other hand, they may have been part of that non-churched minority, who never could make religion work for them, but with his call and his smile, his zest for life

² A friend of mine told me of making this comment to a group of students once, as a guest speaker for a devotional program, and of being thoroughly chastised for it by the group's leader! Sentimental though it may be to think of Jesus as the "first Christian," the founder of our religion, there is simply no evidence that he fully broke with his Jewish tradition. His comment to Peter, "*Upon this rock I will build my church*" (Matthew 16.8) may be cited as evidence to the contrary, but my view, following a consensus of mainline scholarship, is that this statement is a retrospective of the Church, which had been established on Peter's faith, and was read onto the lips of Jesus by the writer of Matthew's gospel, rather than actual words of the historical Jesus.

and compassion for all people, even for them – with him, they finally found a “religion” they could call home. Whatever it was, in Jesus of Nazareth, the disciples found one whom they could call “Lord.” One to whose Way they were willing to commit their lives, to whose life they were willing to identify, *with heart and soul and mind and strength*.³ It is the first meaning of his first title, “Jesus is Lord.”

And then came the cross. And they remembered his call, again: *Follow me*. And they began to see in him that “Suffering Servant” of whom Isaiah spoke. One whose life of service, became a life of sacrifice. And someone thought they remembered him saying not just “*Follow me*,” but “*take up your cross and follow me...*”⁴ And though tradition has it that all of Jesus’ original apostles did in fact follow him in their own martyrdom, this is not a follow-ship that would attract the masses. Somewhere along the way, his “Lordship” changed. This may have happened strategically, in a calculated decision by the ecclesiastical leaders of a new institutional religion in order to enhance numbers and power. It may have happened incidentally, as the lens of history inevitably bends memories to our liking, and as our propensity toward religion causes us to interpret all things through the lens of the supernatural. But however it happened, the Followers of the Way, who called Jesus “Lord,” became “Christians,” who called Jesus “Lord.”

So which is he to you?

³ Though my perspective represents that of liberal scholarship (see below as the sermon speaks of the developing of Christological ideas within the post-Easter church), I include this text from Mark 12.29 (a quotation from Deuteronomy 6.4), as an intentional allusion to the theological affirmation that in Jesus, his followers, even perhaps the earliest followers, found God!

⁴ Again, I have written quite intentionally because I have grown fascinated in recent years by how our scriptures came to be. How much of what we have represents the actual, literal words of the historical Jesus? How much is a theological interpretation by the developing church? How did their experience of Jesus, interacting with their memories of him, and their reading of their own, Hebrew scriptures (after his death), shape the theology of Jesus that did develop in the post-Easter church? In other words, did he literally say, “Take up your cross...”? Or, because that experience was so powerful for them, and his example was so strong for them, did one of the gospel writers read these words onto Jesus’ lips – because whether or not he literally spoke them, they are true to his character, his mission, and the theology that he espoused?

To be fair let me say that neither scripture, nor Christian history, is so clear-cut as to say with anything but arrogant certainty that he was only “Lord,” in a fully human way, until a Christology developed sometime after the Easter experience. This is the bias of liberal scholarship – and I am convinced that Jesus, as the Christ of God, is an understanding that grew in the mind of the Church as the Church sought to define the experience they continued to have in Jesus. But the seeds of that Christology (that Jesus was more than just a man), the seeds are there in the earliest writings of the New Testament. “Lord” was a common greeting for any person of authority in the ancient Hellenistic world. And “Lord” is perhaps the most common name for God in the Jewish vernacular. So when “Lord” became “Lord,” when “Jesus is Lord” became “Jesus is God,” is a question that only scriptural literalists can answer with certainty.⁵

This may sound like arcane theology – too dense for a Sunday sermon, too abstract to be relevant. I hope it is not, for I am afraid that very little of the Church understands who Jesus really was, and too little of the Church has grasped the power of who Jesus really is. Some argue that he was only “Lord” as a human example. For others, as “*Lord and God*,” he has become only an object of fear and awe and worship. But both positions, I believe, miss the point. The former, because a good example (even the best example), does not have the power to transform a life, much less the world, as Jesus still does for those are willing to try to fully submit to his leadership, yes, his “Lordship.” And the latter, because if our confession about Jesus is really just about the next life, we, too, will miss the true transforming power of his Way, which was intended for this life.⁶

⁵ Clearly, for literalists, there is no question. When Jesus said, “*The Father and I are one*” (John 10.30), and the like, the words are understood as literal quotations of the historical Jesus, and the disciples are believed to have acknowledged the full theological implications of these statements immediately. Of course, this may be how it transpired, but I believe a more realistic picture is one of the disciples struggling with their understanding – not unlike we have to do – and only coming to a consensus (if there ever has been such a thing) only in retrospect. For me, the more powerful testimony of the continuing presence of God in the world is one that says the Church, because of their ongoing experience with Jesus (during and after his life) affirmed his “Lordship,” rather than to simply believe Jesus “was God” and “they knew it” just because he told them. (Which is the more accurate experience of Christians today? Is Jesus not the same, “*yesterday, today, and forever*” (Hebrews 13.8)?)

⁶ I am the pastor of an unusual Baptist church, a pastor who happens to have members representing both of these extremes listening to my sermons each week, so my statement is not at all theoretical!

So how is Jesus to be “Lord” to a modern world? To thinking Christians? To critical, sometimes skeptical Christians? The easy answers to his challenge have always fallen along these poles, I think: either admire him, but not really Follow him, or worship him as God – but not really Follow him. The issue is even more complicated in a culture like ours, which has virtually adopted “Christian” religion as the religion of the state. In their book *Resident Aliens*, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, speak of this difficulty:

Both so-called conservative and liberal theologies begin with the assumption that, since we American Christians are fortunate enough to be born into a constitutional democracy where we have rights, we Christians have no fundamental quarrel with the powers-that-be... Both assume wrongly that the American church’s primary social task is to underwrite American democracy (pp.32-33).

It is not.

But this is where it gets difficult, because we have lived for our entire lives in a culture where it is virtually impossible to distinguish between being a good Christian and a good American. America’s values are Jesus’ values, aren’t they?

They are not. As Marcus Borg has so crisply identified:

The dominant values of contemporary American life – affluence, achievement, appearance, power, competition, consumption, individualism – are vastly different from anything recognizably Christian...⁷

Calling Jesus Lord means acknowledging that his values are fundamentally at odds with our values. Yes, even American values. Where we idolize affluence, Jesus says, *It is impossible for a rich man to enter heaven* (Matthew 19.23)... *blessed are the poor* (Luke 6.20). Where we raise achievement as a standard, Jesus says, *The greatest among you is the one who serves* (Matthew 23.11). Where we honor appearance, Jesus hangs out with the least attractive in his society. Where we are seduced by the claims of power for security Jesus says, *Don’t worry about tomorrow* (Matthew 6.25)... and, by the way, who is your enemy, anyway? We value competition. Jesus showed us a life of participation and sharing: *The last shall be first* (Matthew 20.16). We have made consumption a way of life (“He who dies with the most toys wins!”); Jesus says if you want to get to the kingdom, *Sell all that you have and*

⁷ From Marcus Borg’s, *Jesus: A New Vision*. I have lost the specific page citation.

give it all away (Luke 12.33). And there is no greater American value than individualism: my rights, my possessions, but Jesus says, *Greater love has no one than this: that they lay down their life for their friends* (John 15.13). And he demonstrated that he believed this was true.

You probably will not drive the car of your youthful dreams, or live in the beautiful mansion of your choice, even if they are within your means, if Jesus gets to organize your budget. You may not make it to the top of the company ladder if the Beatitudes serve as your strategy for success. You certainly will not win any preemptive wars, if the Prince of Peace gets to decide whom to bomb next.

And until we come to grips with the way our culture, our worldview, our very values are fundamentally at odds with who Jesus was, and who Jesus is, we cannot call him Lord. I submit to you that we will always live, in some ways, at odds with his calling, but recognizing the disparity of values, and allowing Jesus to influence the process of our thinking, is the start.

And how can we do that? Willimon and Hauerwas make this dramatic claim: “The political task of Christians is to be the church rather than to transform the world” (p.39).

Our calling is to one another. To be the church! Just as God sought to make “a people,” a nation through Moses (Exodus 19), so Jesus calls us together to be a Church, a community of faith, a corporate body. Only here, among others trying as we are, can we begin to make sense of the difficult but joyous calling of Jesus. For Paul says we are *always carrying in the body the death of Jesus...* and since this is not a cultural value, only in this body [the congregation], which is his risen body, can we know the power of that claim. We are, say Willimon and Hauerwas, “the community of the cross,”⁸ and only as we learn to die, too: Die to self. Die to the needs of others. Die to the values of this culture, can we be raised to the newness of Jesus’ life.

It’s not an individual calling. Jesus calls us to follow, to join, to be Part of the Movement. And we will need each other if we are to learn what it really means to say, “Jesus is Lord.”

May it be so!

⁸ The full quotation is: “The cross is not a symbol for general human suffering and oppression. Rather, the cross is a sign of what happens when one takes God’s account of reality more seriously than Caesar’s. The cross stands as God’s (and our) eternal no to the powers of death, as well as God’s eternal yes to humanity, God’s remarkable determination not to leave us to our own devices. The overriding political talk of the church is to be the community of the cross” *Resident Aliens*, p. 47.