

MEMBERSHIP OR LORDSHIP?

First, consider the membership of the church in the book of Acts, where we have the beginning of the church. In the beginning, there were twelve (Acts 1:2) then one hundred twenty (Acts 1:15), then three thousand one hundred twenty (Acts 2:41), then eight thousand three hundred twenty (Acts 4:4). The first mega-church was born and continued to grow until they stopped counting and it is simply stated that “more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women were constantly added to their number” (Acts 5:14) and “the disciples were increasing in number” (Acts 6:1). A conservative estimate would be about thirty thousand members by this time. There were only twelve men and seven “deacons” on the staff. They had no arena-mall-like building in which to hold Sunday services. In fact, they did not have Sunday worship services, so they didn’t need a worship minister or a praise band. Building a “worship center” or a “family life center” was never a thought they entertained. No one thought about “joining” or “attending” church”, they were the church. What they “attended” to was the Apostles’ teaching, their fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers plus seeing that the needs of the people were supplied, even if it meant parting with their earthly possessions (Acts 2:42; 4:32-37). How do we account for this phenomenal growth of this church? What method did the church employ to grow? What was its “evangelistic program”? The fascinating answer is they had none. This church reached its great size by four means: 1. incredible events, such as Pentecost; 2. miraculous healings on the part of the Apostles; 3. the daily ministry of the Apostles and finally, 4. the continuous meetings from house to house out of which was born a united fellowship. The principle driving this phenomenal growth is stated by Peter when he declared on the day of Pentecost “this man, Jesus of Nazareth, was put to death, raised again and was exalted to the right hand of God” (Acts 2:22-33). He then states, “God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (ver. 36). It was something vastly more profound than we are experiencing in our churches today. It had a non-material, non-psychological dimension in it. It yielded more than temporary joy and peace. These in the early church found something that bound them together in a common way of life comparable to nothing known in this century. They had been hit hard and deep. Their lives were changed. They not only knew Jesus as “Savior” they knew him as “Lord”. The world listened to them because they were able to see in them the irrefutable evidence of the truth which they proclaimed. And this evidence was seen in their lives because they continued steadfastly in this new way of life. This was something more than church membership and Sunday morning Christianity. This was Christianity, in the words of J. B. Phillips, as “it was meant to be.” Something has happened during the course of time as we look from Pentecost to the twenty-first century. Mega-churches are bursting at the seams and church membership is the highest percentage-wise it has ever been. Churches, without denominational attachment, with modern sounding names, are being “planted” all over this nation. Yet there is a disturbing weakness in the religious picture today. This weakness is seen in the religious world today where the word of God is so often taken lightly. You hear little about Christ being Lord. The invitation is “accept Jesus as your personal Savior,” “ask Jesus into your heart” “invite him into your life,” “whisper a prayer that will

change your eternity, ‘Jesus I believe you and receive you,’ just sign a card and we will send you some literature.” None of these statements is based upon Biblical terminology. We are not just being technical. The call of Jesus was more than a call to church membership, it was a call to his Lordship which meant submissive obedience. He did not present himself as Savior only, but as Lord, a Lord that called for complete commitment and behavior that shows evidence of that commitment. Contemporary church members have been led to believe that if they joined the church, recited a prayer, signed a card, walked down the aisle, or had some religious experience they are saved. Jesus rejected some very good people, people church members think would make good church members today, such as Nicodemus and the rich young ruler. Today’s church, with a snappy, eye-catching name would be happy to welcome a devout man as Cornelius into church membership, but Peter had to proclaim to him “words whereby you and your household would be saved” (Acts 11:14).

Elton Trueblood has a word for this generation of church members. He says in his book *The Company of the Committed*: “In many contemporary Christian congregations the entire church operation points to a climax on Sunday morning, a conception which would have seemed very strange indeed to the early Christians. Often the major effort during the week is the promotion of ‘Sunday’ with slick polished printed material plugging constantly for a bigger attendance. Sunday morning, then, when it finally comes, has something of the mood of a much-advertised athletic contest, for which the team has prepared and to which it has been pointed all week. Finally, at twelve o’clock on Sunday, the whistle blows, the climatic event is over for another week, and the spectators go home to relax.” Now perhaps such a description of the modern church shocks our sanctified imagination and causes us to cringe at such a description, which by our Pharisaical standards, borders on the sacrilegious.

In the New Testament, the Pharisees and Sadducees became the prime example of religious failure which serves as a warning to the church today. The Sadducees sold out to materialism and ritual. The Pharisees produced a dead religion although they were in search of a means to reach a level of acceptance with God. The Pharisees (representing Evangelical church membership today) were a very close-knit club. Their answer for pleasing God was “become like us.” Their message: (to put it in modern language) “believe like us, dress like us, act like us, like what we like and don’t like what we don’t like.” In church language: if you want to know God and change your life come to us. We have a nice building, a great musical program, an outstanding youth program with a hippy young youth director and a great staff to serve you. Anything in the world that attracts you we can provide the same, just come and get it. Because of this thinking the modern church’s target has been the church itself, resulting in church membership without the Lordship of Christ. The modern church’s sincere efforts to evangelize the world and see the church grow has established a form of religion which is foreign to the teaching of Scripture on the purpose and conduct of the church. Today’s methods may fill churches, just as they can fill stadiums for rock concerts, but work done in that way will be the world’s work, not the work of God.

Let's turn now to the Lordship of Christ as revealed in the New Testament. In it Jesus is referred to as *Savior* 17 times and he is referred to as *Lord* approximately 700 times. The book of Acts refers to him as *Lord* over 90 times and as savior only 3 times. This shows the Lordship of Christ was the heart of the preaching and believing in the early Church. In contrast to the easy believism of today or "cheap grace" as Bonhoeffer called it, Jesus taught that the cost of following him is high, unless one is willing to pay the price they cannot enter the kingdom. Consider Matthew 7:13, 14, 23: "Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter it. For the gate is small and way narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it...not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." There are many passages that say the same thing. This says Jesus must not only be our Savior but our Lord. Romans 10:9 states: "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as *Lord* and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you shall be saved." The great German theologian, Anders Nygren, in his *Commentary on Romans*, wrote on this verse: "A Christian is one who confesses that Jesus is *Lord*. God has exalted Jesus and given him a name that is above every name that all may 'confess that Jesus Christ is *Lord*' (Phil.2:9-11). God has given Jesus divine honor and power and made him *Lord* over all. 'He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them' (Col. 2:15). To be a Christian is to have Christ as one's *Lord*, and thereby be free from all other lords and powers."

In the opening verses of his epistles, (Ephesians 1:3 and II Corinthians 1:3) Paul states: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Peter makes the same statement in his first epistle (I Pet. 1:3). This is a new description of God. In the Old Testament He is said to be "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." In these New Testament passages He is said to be the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is not only a new revelation of God, but it says something about Jesus. He is Lord Christ. "Jesus" was the name given by his Father through the angel when he appeared to Joseph, "You shall call his name Jesus, for it is he who will save his people from their sin" (Matt. 1:21). Paul states: "God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus" (Acts 13:23). Jesus then was his human name, divinely given, who was God's anointed Messiah or Christ. Peter declared on the day of Pentecost that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, was put to death, raised again and was exalted to the right hand of God" (Acts 2:22-23). He then states: "God has made him both *Lord* and *Christ*, this Jesus whom you crucified" (ver. 36). Much fundamentalist preaching urges sinners to "make him Lord of your life." We do not make him Lord, He is Lord. Thus, he is declared in Scripture to be our "Lord and Savior" (II Pet. 1:1, 2:20, 3:2, 18). He is Savior because of the cross (a crucified Christ). He is Lord because of the resurrection and ascension. He is both "Savior" and "Lord." To us he cannot be "Lord" without first being "Savior" but he can be "Savior" and never be "Lord," and this is not sufficient for salvation.

In Acts 2 when Peter preached on the day of Pentecost he speaks of the death of Christ in one verse (verse 23) and speaks of the resurrection and ascension in thirteen verses (verses 24-26). When the risen Christ appeared to Mary Magdalene He told her, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father, but go and tell my brethren, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God'" (John 20:17). One of the great tragedies of the church has been a failure to realize the significance of the ascension and getting beyond the cross. This

is the reason there has been so much emphasis on Jesus as "Savior" and so little emphasis on Jesus as "Lord." Countless sermons are being preached on the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ, but few preachers have preached a sermon of the ascension of Christ. Some churches that follow the "church calendar" celebrate Ascension Day, but for the most part it is one of the most neglected doctrines in Scripture. When consulting a popular modern hymn book, we found 44 hymns on the birth of Christ, 56 on his death, 19 on his resurrection and 1 on his ascension. With the modern ascent of contemporary church music there would be a famine of any hymns mentioned above, much less any on his ascension and glorification.

We are still "clinging" to Christ and will not allow Him to ascend. We want to keep Him at best on the cross, shedding His blood and being our Savior, but not presenting himself to the Father on our behalf in the Holy Place not made with hands, thus becoming our Lord. The Old Testament sacrifices could only "cleanse to the purifying of the flesh" (Heb.9:13) because their sin was not punished. The death of Christ punished their sin: "...since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions *that were committed under the first covenant*, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance" (Heb. 9:15). It was only after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ that God could forgive sins and remember them no more (Heb. 8:12; 10:17). The penalty of sin is death, not unending punishment. When Jesus died on the cross he paid the wages of sin, therefore, the cross is the basis of God's forgiveness of sin, but we must go beyond the cross to understand the full meaning of Lordship.

Our redemption was not completed with the cross and resurrection. Jesus had to "enter the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, not through the blood of goats and calves but through his own blood, he entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (Heb.9:11,12). His ascension then, completes our redemption. It was then that God made him "both Lord and Christ." Gerrit Scott Dawson in his book *Jesus Ascended* states "In a time when the western church is fiercely debating the uniqueness of Jesus and our people are drowning in a flood of busy, demanding lifestyles, the ascension is an absolutely crucial part of the gospel story to recover." Christ, as Lord, has been "seated on His (God's) right hand in the heavenlies, far above all rule and authority and power not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Eph.1.20, 21). If we neglect the Lordship of Christ, we miss the New Testament's most quoted passage from the Old Testament: Psalm 110. "The Lord said to my Lord, sit on My right hand until I make your enemies the footstool of your feet. The Lord will stretch forth your strong scepter from Zion, saying, 'rule in the midst of your enemies.'" If as *Lord* he rules in the midst of his enemies, he is Lord of all life. To accept him as our Savior yet refuse his rule in our life as Lord is a religious absurdity.

When it is stated that God has made him both *Lord and Christ* God is saying the aim of salvation is not just to save us, but to save us in order that we might "become conformed to the image of His son" (Rom.8:29). When we are told "the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men" (Titus 2:11), we are told what is demanded when we receive this grace: "instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and live sensibly, righteously, and godly in this present age...because he gave himself for us that he might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for himself a people for his own possession, zealous of good deeds" (ver.12, 14). Church membership is not enough.