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Bridgeway Church / Foundations
The Christian Life (2)

***The Christian Life:
What is Involved and How do I Live it?
Part Two***

The Christian Life and the Lordship of Jesus

A crucial and somewhat controversial issue relating to the Christian life is the nature and extent of the Lordship of Jesus over the individual Christian. This has sometimes been called the "Lordship Salvation" controversy. We need to address it carefully.

(1) ***Those who affirm "Lordship" salvation*** oppose the idea that one may have saving faith without submitting to the Lordship of Jesus in daily obedience. We are saved by faith alone, but not by the faith which is alone (*Sola fides iustificat, sed non fides quae est sola*).

Saving faith is a working faith. That faith by means of which we are justified is the *kind or quality* of faith that produces obedience and the fruit of the Spirit. In the absence of obedience, in the absence of fruit, in the absence of submission to the lordship of Jesus, there is doubt whether the faith is *saving*.

(2) ***Opponents of lordship salvation*** insist that such a view introduces works into the gospel and compromises grace. Faith *should*, but may not, produce works of obedience. According to this view, *you can be a Christian without necessarily being a disciple; you can receive Jesus as Savior without necessarily submitting to Him as Lord*. How you live and what you believe after you profess faith in Christ has no bearing on whether you really believed in Him in the first place.

On this view, it is altogether possible that a born-again believer may repudiate the faith, turn his back on Jesus, and become an unbeliever. However, advocates of the non-Lordship position generally affirm eternal security. Thus heaven will receive ***saved unbelievers!***

(3) Note that in Romans 10:9 Paul identifies the confession of Jesus as *Lord* to be an essential element in the gospel message. The Greek word *Kurios* ("Lord") is used more than 6,000x in the LXX to translate the name YHWH. Many of these OT texts referring to YHWH are applied to Jesus in the NT. For example, its use in Joel 2:32 is applied to Jesus in Romans 10:13. Thus, confession of the "Lordship" of Jesus entails, at minimum, the confession of his full and perfect deity. Jesus is YHWH incarnate. In Phil. 2:10 Paul describes the title *Kurios* as "the name which is above every name," which can only be the name of God himself. Thus, as Cranfield notes, "the confession that Jesus is Lord meant the acknowledgment that Jesus shares the name and the nature, the holiness, the authority, power, majesty and eternity of the one and only true God" (2:529).

In Romans 10:9 the confession of Jesus as Lord refers to the lordship he exercises by virtue of his exaltation. It points to his investiture with universal dominion. Thus, "the hearer of the gospel message is called upon to affirm an article of faith, namely, that by virtue of his death and resurrection, Jesus has been exalted to a place of sovereignty over all men" (Alan Chrisope, *Jesus is Lord* [Evangelical Press, 1982], 62-3).

(4) This confession involves the acknowledgment of the rightful authority of Jesus Christ over the life of the believer. According to George E. Ladd, this confession "reflects the personal experience of the confessor. He confesses Jesus as Lord because he has received Jesus Christ as *his* Lord (Col. 2:6). He has entered into a new relationship in which he acknowledges the absolute sovereignty and mastery of the exalted Jesus over his life" (*Theology of the NT*, 415).

Q: "Can we *believe* in Jesus Christ in the biblical sense of that term if we do not intend to submit to his authority?"

(5) The doctrine of Lordship Salvation views saving faith neither as passive nor fruitless. The faith that is the product of regeneration, the faith that embraces the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross *energizes* a life of love and obedience and worship. The controversy is not a dispute about whether salvation is by faith only or by faith plus works. All agree that we are saved by grace through faith, apart from works (Eph. 2:8-10). But the controversy is about the *nature* of the faith that saves. According to Lordship Salvation,

Sola fides iustificat (faith alone justifies), *sed non fides quae est sola* (but not the faith which is alone).

(6) We must distinguish between the *content* of faith and the *consequences* of faith. To say that faith *issues* in good works does *not* mean faith *is* good works. To say that works are the *expression* of faith does *not* mean works are the *essence* of faith.

(7) Lordship salvation does *not* teach that Christians can't sin. It *does* teach that Christians can't live complacently in it. Lordship salvation does not say Christians will be sinless. But it does insist that Christians will *sin less*. Christians *do* sin, but they don't *practice* it (1 John 3:6). Christians sin; sometimes seriously. But if they are Christians, they will suffer for it (Heb. 12). Complacency and contentment in sin are the hallmark of the unregenerate soul. *Conviction* is the sign of the saved one. In other words, the Christian will sin, but it will make him miserable. *Dead people don't fight!*

(8) Thus lordship salvation recognizes a distinction between the implicit acknowledgment by the new convert of the *principle* of Christ's rightful authority over his life and the explicit *practice* of progressive submission to the Christ who is Lord. Receiving Christ as Savior *and* Lord does not mean the new convert is wholly committed. It does mean he is committed to being holy.

Someone might object saying that she accepted Jesus as Savior when twelve years old but didn't submit to His Lordship until she was 30. "If Lordship salvation is true," she says, "had I died when I was a teenager I would have gone to hell."

No. Jesus was her Lord from the moment of her conversion. Her experience since then has been one of more or less yieldedness to his sovereign rights as Lord over her life. She says she didn't fully submit to his lordship then. She is right. But she has *not fully submitted even now*, or she would be sinlessly perfect. The Christian life is one that begins with accepting and bowing to Jesus as Sovereign ruler and Lord . . . *with a progressive degree of experiential submission as one matures*. The Lordship of Christ is not something one discovers and yields to only once but thousands of times over the course of our Christian experience.

(9) Lordship salvation insists that *repentance* is essential to the gospel message (see Luke 24:47). Says John MacArthur:

"If someone is walking away from you and you say, 'Come here,' it is not necessary to say 'turn around and come.' The U-turn is implied in the direction 'come'. In like manner, when our Lord says, 'Come to Me' (Mt. 11:28), the about-face of repentance is understood" (34).

An objection raised by opponents of Lordship salvation is that the gospel of John, which is admittedly a document focusing on unbelievers, never mentions *repentance*. Three things may be said in response:

First, John wrote his gospel after Matthew, Mark, and Luke and did not wish to unnecessarily repeat what they thoroughly addressed. The synoptic gospels speak repeatedly about repentance.

Second, John's focus in his gospel record is on the identity of Jesus and believing who he is.

Third, although the word "repentance" is absent from the fourth gospel, numerous things are said about believers that imply, if not require, the presence of repentance in their lives: Christians are portrayed as those who love the light (3:19), hate the darkness (3:20-21), obey the Son (3:36), practice the truth (3:21), worship in spirit and truth (4:23-24), honor God (5:22-24), do good deeds (5:29), love God (8:42), follow Jesus (10:26-28), and keep his commandments (14:15).

(10) This controversy also focuses on the grounds for *assurance of salvation*. Advocates of lordship salvation recognize three grounds:

The first and preeminent ground for assurance of salvation is the inescapable logic of John 3:16. Christ died for sinners. All who believe in Christ's death have eternal life. I have believed in Christ. Therefore, I have eternal life. We can have assurance we are saved because we know God's word is true concerning the saving work of Christ and the eternal destiny of those who embrace it by faith.

Second, according to Romans 8:16 (and other texts), the Holy Spirit awakens our hearts with the inner, subjective, intuitive confirmation and confidence that indeed we are God's children.

Third, the reality of the root is borne out by the fruit. Loyalty, love, and obedience bear witness to the reality of one's profession. Where there is no fruit, there may be no root. See John 8:31; Heb. 3:14; 1 John 2:3-4,19.

John 8:31-47 - Note the statements of cause and effect in the relationship between one's true paternity and one's practice. See esp. vv. 37, 39, 41, 42, 47. In v. 42 we observe that their merely "saying" that God was their Father didn't make it so. Only their behavior and passion for Jesus would reflect the reality of their profession.

Discussion Questions

(1) What precisely are the two sides of this debate saying about the nature of Christian faith? In other words, how would an advocate of Lordship Salvation define the faith that saves? How would an advocate of so-called Free Grace define it?

(2) Discuss the meaning and implications of this statement:

Sola fides iustificat (faith alone justifies), *sed non fides quae est sola* (but not the faith which is alone).

(3) If a person insists on the truth of Lordship Salvation, how do we avoid corrupting the grace of salvation by introducing works? In other words, how would we avoid drawing the conclusion that salvation is by works as well as by faith?

(4) How does it help in this debate to differentiate between the content of faith and the consequences of faith? What do we mean by each of these terms?

(5) Is it true that advocates of so-called Free Grace (the opponents of Lordship Salvation) make it possible for professing Christians to live in sin without fear or divine discipline? Does Free Grace theology encourage licentiousness and disobedience?