Introduction:

**Christianish**

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“Everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father in heaven” (**Matthew 10:32-33**, ESV). “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” (**Romans 10:9**). Christianity is a confessing religion for a confessing people. And the fundamental creed we confess is not one written by men, but revealed by the Holy Spirit: Jesus is Lord. Do you believe that? I get it. You may be only considering Christianity. You may not be convinced yet that Jesus is Lord. That is okay. But as you give consideration to Christianity, I want you to have your eyes fully open to what Christianity is. At the fundamental base of Christianity is this confession: Jesus is Lord. Everything else about Christianity grows from there. Jesus is Lord. For those willing to confess that right now, can you say it with me? “Jesus is Lord!” But what does it mean to make that confession? The way we answer these questions determines the difference between being Christian and only Christian·ish.

Discussion:

1. The confession is not…
   1. The confession is not Jesus is our friend. The confession is not Jesus is our example. The confession is not even that Jesus is our Savior. Please, don’t be confused. Jesus is all of these things. Many people are even willing to confess these things, but these are not the Christian confession. These things are only Christian·ish. They have a touch or trace of Christianity. They are somewhat Christian. But they are not fully Christian.
   2. These confessions are similar to the confession of the fellow we call the rich, young ruler. He came to Jesus in **Luke 18:18** and in front of all the crowds was willing to confess, “Jesus is the Good Teacher.” There is no doubt, that is true. But even Jesus challenged the rulers confession: “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone” (**Luke 18:19**). His confession was not completely bad. But it was not the true confession, it was not the saving confession. His confession was Christian·ish; it wasn’t the Christian confession. The Christian confession is “Jesus is Lord.”
2. The confession in the age of Roman Imperialism
   1. Regrettably, because we are 2000 years and a couple of empires removed from Jesus’s day, even when we realize the confession is “Jesus is Lord,” we may misunderstand. Today, this statement can just seem a religious, churchy thing to say. “Yes, yes, Jesus is Lord.” But when Jesus spoke of being acknowledged before men and Paul instructed us to confess Jesus is Lord, they weren’t using religionish language. They were using political language. They were declaring a battle. They were announcing a revolution, albeit spiritual not military, against Caesar. “Lord” was not just a nice thing to say about Jesus. It wasn’t saying, “Jesus is important to me.” Nor “Jesus holds an honorable position.” This was a direct competition with Caesar. In the Bible we can see this competition in passages like **John 19:14-15**. “Lord” was the title for the King, the Emperor. “Caesar is Lord,” was the confession of the Romans. When the Jews pushed for Jesus to be crucified, they confessed Caesar as their king. That is, Caesar is lord. We see it again in **Acts 17:7**. When Paul was in Thessalonica, the Jews again spoke against Jesus and the Christians. Their accusation was that the Christians went against the decrees of Caesar, “saying that there is another king, Jesus.”
   2. To really see this competition, consider what is called the Calendar Inscription of Priene (so named because it was found on two stones in the town of Priene in Asia Minor). Listen to the inscription:

It seemed good to the Greeks of Asia, in the opinion of the high priest Apollonius of Menophilus Azanitus: “Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for the world that came by reason of him,” which Asia resolved in Smyrna.[[1]](#footnote-1)

While the word “Lord” is not used in this inscription, do you hear the competition? This inscription dates to about 9BC. It represents the Imperial worship culture of Rome before Christ even came on the scene. When Jesus and Paul said things about confessing Jesus, they were adopting language that up until that point had been used to refer to Caesar. Their claim, Caesar is not king, Jesus is. Caesar is not Lord, Jesus is.

* 1. Consider another ancient example of this battle. In about 112 AD, just following the close of Christian canon, the Roman governor of Bithynia, Pliny the Younger, sent a letter to the Roman Emperor Trajan asking for insight on how to conduct trials for Christians and how to punish them.

I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed.

…

Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, **offered prayer with incense and wine to your image**, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ—none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do—these I thought should be discharged.[[2]](#footnote-2) (emphasis added, *ELC*)

Do you again see the competition? Rome saw the competition. You either confess Jesus or you confess Caesar. Acknowledging Jesus before men was not simply saying nice things about Jesus. It was acknowledging that you had no other king but Jesus.

* 1. I trust you grasp what this is saying. The confession that Jesus is Lord is a confession that Jesus directs me, controls me, governs me. My allegiance is to Him above all others, whether governors, presidents, parents, preachers, priests, professors. Jesus describes what this confession means in one of the chapters we have recently read together in our weekly readings. In **Luke 14:25-33**, He says, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (ESV). Count the cost, He says. The cost isn’t merely renouncing a couple of hours per week to “go to church.” Rather, He says, “Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (ESV). “Jesus is Lord” is a confession that my allegiance is not to my family, not to my country, not to my money, not to my pleasure, not to my goals, not to my alma mater. My allegiance is to Jesus. This doesn’t mean I have to abandon any or all of these things at once. But it does mean I renounce my hold on them and their hold on me. It means I renounce my control over any of these relationships or tools. Jesus gets to control them. I conduct myself in these relationships the way Jesus says. I use these tools the way Jesus says. And if at any point they come into conflict with Jesus, Jesus wins. Even if it costs me my life. That is the confession that Jesus is Lord. Anything less is not Christian. It is only Christian·ish.

1. More than a statement.
   1. Our confession is not merely in word, but also in deed. In **Matthew 7:21-23**, Jesus explains just saying, “Lord, Lord,” is not true allegiance. Further, it is not enough to confess Jesus as Lord and then do some religious things. Here are people who called Jesus Lord and had done some really spiritual things, but Jesus declares, “I never knew you.” What do we see about these people? They believed they were Christian, but they were only Christian·ish. What was the real key? Actions that matched up with the confession. Confessing Jesus not only in word, but in deed by doing His Father’s will.
   2. Jesus explains this clearly in **Luke 6:46**. “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you” (ESV). Then He tells the story about the two builders (**Luke 6:47-49**). Because we normally study this parable when Matthew records it at the end of the Sermon on the Mount (see **Matthew 7:24-27**) we miss something Luke’s telling points out. The folks who build their house on the sand not only hears the words of Jesus, at least some of them even call him Lord. They just don’t do what He says. They weren’t Christian; they were Christian·ish.
   3. We acknowledge Jesus before men not simply when we say the words, “Jesus is Lord.” The fact is, unlike in Rome, our culture is not really opposed to us verbalizing our confession. Our world doesn’t see the words themselves as countercultural. They are okay with the declaration that Jesus is Lord as long as we keep the application of that declaration compartmentalized to our private lives and perhaps within our church buildings. However, even then, increasingly, our world doesn’t care if we declare Jesus is Lord as long as the application of that declaration fits with what the world wants. We, however, acknowledge Jesus before men by doing what He says, even when what He says is countercultural.
2. Being Christian in a Christian·ish world.
   1. Please, allow me to share with you why this is so important for us to emphasize right now, in today’s world. We are told that we live in a post-Christian America. Fewer and fewer people among each successive generation are claiming to be Christian. In fact, a recent editorial by Timothy Beal (professor of religion at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, OH) in the Wall Street Journal reveals 44% of Americans age 18-29 actually claim “None” as their religious affiliation.[[3]](#footnote-3) Think about that. 65% of all Americans claim to be Christian right now (down from 78% in 2007), but in that newly adulting age bracket, less than half claim to have any religion, let alone Christianity.
   2. Beal assesses the problem and gives his solution.
      1. Apparently, according to a 2018 Pew Research Center poll, the most significant reason young people give for abandoning religion is because they “question a lot of religious teachings.” Based on this, Beal asserts the big problem is folks have “a tragically narrow understanding of religion—namely, that religion is a fixed set of teachings and positions, and that to be religious is to submit to them without question. It is presumed that religion is authoritative, univocal and changeless, and that religious identity is essentially a matter of passive adherence.” Notice the four “tragically narrow” presumptions about religion, especially Christianity: 1authoritative, 2univocal, 3changeless, and 4about passive adherence. His implication is these presumptions must be dismissed.
         1. We should not think of the Christian religion as expressed through the New Testament as authoritative. But, my friends, if Jesus is Lord, is not His word authoritative? How can it be any other way?
         2. Neither should we view it as univocal; that is, being administered by one voice. His point is that everyone gets a say in religion. But, brothers and sisters, if Jesus is Lord, isn’t His voice the only one that matters? Multi-vocal religion sounds good in a democracy, but Jesus isn’t our president. Jesus is Lord.
         3. Neither should we view it as changeless. All religion, Beal says, including Christianity is supposed to change over time. “Questioning religious teachings and positions has always been an essential part of religion. No faith is fixed and changeless. On the contrary, reinterpreting inherited scriptures and traditions in light of new horizons of meaning is critical to the life of any religion.” That is, Christianity has to change if it wants to survive. But change how? By reinterpreting Scripture in light of new horizons of meaning. Understand, his new horizons of meaning are not limited to figuring out a passage means something different than we originally thought. New horizons of meaning refers to all the things we have figured out in our post-modern, enlightened, intelligence that we add into the Scripture and use to alter our understanding of Scripture. But wait. If Jesus is Lord, should our interpretation be based on our new horizons of meaning or on His horizon of meaning?
         4. Finally, we should not see religion as passive adherence to a set of teachings and positions. Finally, he and I agree. Kind of. Christianity is not passive adherence. It is an active adherence. Our confession is that Jesus is Lord. Our job is not to passively adhere but to actively figure out what our King has directed and then actively adhere to it, actively promote it and propagate it that the one, true Kingdom might flourish and grow on earth as it is in heaven. We should question to discover what Jesus actually says in His Word, but we should never question what He says in His Word.
      2. Beal’s final bit of advice is to conduct Christianity the way he does his class room discussions. He says we need to give people “access to religion not as a set of teachings and positions but as a space for active engagement with enduring questions.” What does that statement even mean? There is no religion, Christianity least among them, that purports to be a space to engage with enduring questions. Every religion sees itself as the answer to the enduring questions. The approach Beal is suggesting is that Christianity is merely an outlook to be taken under advisement as I engage with enduring questions. Then I am left to answer and adjust those answers as I see fit in the changing culture even if that means reinterpreting the Scripture I claim to base my religion upon. But whom does that make Lord? Doesn’t that make me Lord. And that is not my confession. I love the way Albert Mohler described this kind of thinking. This kind of thinking is not religious; it is religiousishness. And when applied to the New Testament scriptures it will not produce someone who is Christian, it will produce someone who is Christian·ish.
   3. This is the kind of Christianity our culture is okay with. It is the kind of Christianity they will be pressuring us to accept. This religiousish version of Christianity will be welcome. A Christianity that is remade in the image of the culture, where all the ancient teachings and Scriptures are reinterpreted to fit with modern enlightened perspective will be acceptable. There was a time when theologians asked for Christianity to be reformed and restored. There was a time when the questioning encouraged was to ask what Christianity was originally and get back to that. No longer are folks looking to reform and restore Christianity, but to reinterpret and remake it.
   4. Christian·ish This is the world in which we must acknowledge Jesus before people. This is the world in which we must confess that Jesus is Lord. We must do so in word and in deed. We must confess Jesus’s lordship by maintaining His teaching in the face of those who would change it for their new horizons of meaning. And we must do so as they belittle us, mock us, call us evil, and try to end us. And that is the scary part. What if we are wrong? What if they are right? Do we need to confess so loudly? Maybe we can hold off and see which way the wind blows before we bow the knee before Jesus and confess Him as Lord. I love what C.S. Lewis says about this, writing shortly after the end of World War II:

Why is God landing in this enemy-occupied world in disguise and starting a sort of secret society to undermine the devil? Why is He not landing in force, invading it? Is it that He is not strong enough? Well, Christians think He is going to land in force; we do not know when. But we can guess why He is delaying. He wants to give us the chance of joining His side freely. I do not suppose you and I would have thought much of a Frenchman who waited till the Allies were marching into Germany and then announced he was on our side.

We must not wait until the victory has become clear. We must take our stand even now. No matter what anyone else says or does, we must declare, “Jesus is Lord. Jesus is Lord. Jesus is Lord.” We must say it; we must live it. Then we must face whatever the world brings against us. Choose your side. Do not settle for being Christian·ish. Be a Christian. Jesus is Lord.

Conclusion:

Understand this. Jesus is the real deal. He really lived. He really died. He was really resurrected. “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (**Philippians 2:9-10**). The day is coming when everyone will eventually bow their knee before King Jesus. The day is coming when everyone will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Will you do it now by free choice in the presence of the enemies, in hopes that they too will be saved. Or will you wait until as conquered and vanquished enemies you are forced to the ground to declare that you wish you had served Him all along. The choice is yours. Jesus is Lord. Whether you confess it or not, whether you live it or not doesn’t change the fact that it is so. Jesus will win. Will you acknowledge Him now? Will you do so before men and women who will mock and deride you, who will chastise and torment you, who will do everything in the power to get you to change your confession? Or will you wait? Let us always be a confessing people. Let us not settle for being Christian·ish. Let us be Christian.

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calendar\_Inscription\_of\_Priene#Inscription\_text [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/pliny.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Timothy Beal, The Wall Street Journal, “Can Religion Still Speak to Younger Americans?”, November 14, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)