

Is Jesus Lord in Time of War?

or

What Does It Mean to Say 'Jesus is Lord' in Time of War?

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[This short essay was written for a workshop of this title given at The Leadership Training School of the Oklahoma Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Oklahoma City on January 31, 2004. It was meant to stimulate discussion within my own tradition, but I believe it has some usefulness even beyond that. Responses are welcome. Posted here 2/1/04. Published in *Encounter*, Vol. 65, No. 3 (Summer 2004). pp. 215-221.]

Fellow Members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), at the beginning of our discussion of this topic, I want to make a couple of points about our shared tradition.

First, I would have you recall the question that was put to you at the time of your baptism. With a few variations, I suspect what you were asked is similar to this question put to me: **Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and do you accept him as your personal Savior and Lord?**

Second, I would remind you of the oft-repeated phrase in our tradition of “**no creed but Christ.**”

In the autumn of a lifetime of living in Disciples churches and teaching in two Disciples seminaries and a Disciples university, I have come to the reluctant and painful conclusion that these phrases are by and large empty of **communal content**. Both the baptismal question and “no creed but Christ” have been shibboleths—passwords—for being a member of the Disciples tradition, but we dared not venture to give either shibboleth the content that would make them binding and meaningful. Both locutions are seemingly Christ-centered, but it appears that our tradition has been persistently adamant in refusing to give any further communal definition to what it means to say ‘Jesus is Lord’ and ‘Jesus is the center of our faith.’ **We are christocentric—Christ-centered—in appearance but not in substance or in actual practice.**

Let me make some expansions on these two locutions about Jesus being Lord. Taking first the baptismal question, it is meet and right to ask the baptizee whether she will accept Jesus as her personal Savior and Lord. But this is almost meaningless without some grounding in Jesus being in actuality Savior and Lord, whether or not the baptizee really does accept Jesus as her Savior and Lord. Surely we must also be claiming that Jesus is Savior and Lord not just insofar as the baptizee accepts him as her Savior and Lord but in such a way that he is of the reality of God. Calling Jesus Lord was a great transformation of concepts for Jews for whom ‘Lord’ named only Yahweh, the God of Israel. **But if Jesus is Lord, then, he is of the very reality of the God of Israel.** Further, if he is Lord indeed, then he is Lord over all the creation and of all human history. Simply put, if Jesus is Lord, then his followers are to discern in him the character of that power that reigns over all things as the Alpha and the Omega of the whole creation. Hence, **how he lived his life, how he taught about God and human life, how he was crucified by the powers of the world, and how he was raised from the dead all become pertinent to how we Christians understand God and ourselves and how we are to live, even in times of war.**

Because we Disciples have refused to affirm together in a public confession of faith the things I have just said, it is questionable whether we have ever had a common understanding of who Jesus is and why we might call him Lord and Savior.

Likewise, take the statement “no creed but Christ.” It seems to be telling us that creeds—as those confessions of faith that intend to state what is central to Christian faith—are all negligible compared to Christ. But who is this Christ anyhow? **Are there some teachings about this Christ that are central to Christian faith and the church?** Or, is it all up for grabs, left to each person and each pastor to interpret who Christ is according to his own predilections? I think, in fact, our tradition has been ruled by no common confession as to who Christ is and why he is significant. But we have been ruled by a veritable chaos of individual creeds that each local pastor might lay on the congregation. Put simply, if there are no firm and truthful teachings about who Jesus is as Lord and Savior—and it is all left up to individual believer to determine for herself what any of this might mean—then it is utterly opaque as to who Jesus is, and the center of our faith is not Jesus but whatever we prefer to say about him. This leaves us basically deciding theology and ethics by our own individual lights. The real **dogma** at the center of our church’s discourses and actual practices is that it is left to each individual to decide what is credible. Beyond that dogma we have no common mind, no common Gospel, no common understanding of who God is.

Let me clarify my concern about a common faith with some definiteness of meaning as central to the discourses and practices of the church. Let us admit that in the actual life of any particular person it is always the case that she has to construe for herself what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. But that is not to say that there should be no common teachings or doctrines about Jesus as Lord and Savior that comprise the core of the faith of the church and in relation to which any particular member of the church must make up her own mind and live her life. Hence, the very integrity of the church, as called into being by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, depends on having a common articulable and public faith that shapes the beliefs and actions of the living faith of the individuals who participate in the church’s life.

In my judgment our steadfast refusal to put any common and shared conceptual meat on the mantra of ‘Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and Savior and Lord’, is at the heart of the widespread disarray and even discouragement in our tradition today. Our discourses and therefore also our practices in regard to Jesus are in chaotic discord. **This leaves us vulnerable to having the center of our faith occupied by idols of the moment, whether those idols are the politics of the state or the fear of enemies far and wide.** When the discourses and practices of the church are in disarray, then we can also conclude that the way its members construe themselves, construe Jesus, and construe the world may be in stark contrast to how the NT and earlier traditions have construed Jesus and the reality of God and the destiny of the world.

If it were the case that our tradition understood in common language that Jesus is Savior of the world and the Lord who truly reigns over all creation and the destiny of the world, then you would think that **the character of Jesus’ life, his pattern of acting and teaching concerning the kingdom of God, his crucifixion, and his resurrection would affect how Christians would construe discipleship to Jesus, construe war and violence, and how they would act in time of war.**

Yet here we confront one of the strangest reversals of meaning taking place among Christians in the United States and among Christians in many of the nation-states that have sprung into existence in the last two centuries. **All of these nation-states are founded in and sustained by violence.** Their borders drip with wars of conquest and wars of self-defense. The reversal is that **the Christians in these states regularly go to war as though they are in utter denial or ignorance of how Jesus is relevant to their war-making.** Jesus may be a comfort to the soldier and those left at home, but that Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection have some bearing on how Christians should construe the justification of going to war seems utterly denied. **When we want to justify our wars, Christians here and abroad repeatedly appeal to some other lord or principle or necessity that justifies fighting war.**

So, if we ask now whether Jesus being Lord has anything to do with the war against terrorism, and, as our president would have us believe as well, has something to do with going to war in Iraq, we seem tongue-tied. Why is this? I suggest to you it is because **our Jesus**—the one we have left up to each individual to construe for herself—is **so thin and threadbare in ethics and theology that we can easily put him on**

the shelf and do our warring on the grounds of other lords and principalities and powers.

So let us look again at what it might mean to say 'Jesus is Lord in time of war.' Surely even a cursory look at the NT would reveal that Jesus consistently taught that we were to love others and seek their good even to the point of self-denial. His followers referred to themselves as slaves and servants, and they did not mean that they supported the social practice of chattel slavery but that they were to serve others as Jesus did precisely because he is the Lord who truly reigns over life and death. Jesus spoke of loving strangers and enemies, and we are not to suppose he had in mind a mere strong inward affection about enemies. His disciples were to turn the other cheek, go the second mile, refuse to return evil for evil, give up the inclination toward revenge, and seek peace nonviolently in the whole of their lives. Are these not 'cross-bearing' acts fitting for those who follow the cross-bearing Jesus?

But the practical political codes of the nations of the world in Jesus' time and in ours are that any nation has the moral right to defend itself against enemies and go to war when its leaders judge it necessary. That has usually been interpreted as **going to war as a last resort**, but we now have the aura of moral legitimacy being cast over the belief and practice that a nation can go to war to pre-empt what it judges an enemy might do. Further, according to these codes some lives are justifiably expendable, both of ours and of the enemy's. **Whence cometh this logic, this discourse, and this practice into the discourses and practices of the church?** It seems to me particularly to be the case in the time of this war against terrorism that Christians should wonder whether we have suddenly permitted another lord—the nation-state and its leaders—to determine how we are to live, how we are to construe enemies, how we are justified morally in doing what we do.

So, let us admit, all Christians in the United States are also citizens of the US. And let us admit that most of us have deep regard for our nation, however critical of it we may be from time to time. Hence, we seem to be citizens both of the nation-state and of the church. **The nation-state is called into being and maintained by acts of violence; the church is called into existence by Jesus Christ to live in conformity to Jesus and his coming Kingdom.** Why is it that our citizenship in the church and the Kingdom are not the decisive determinants of how we live our lives? Is it not true, then, that when we make the state the formative power in how we understand ourselves and our enemies we also thereby make the state into an idol—a surrogate god that we revere, adore, and obey and in which we trust to protect us and give us meaning?

Let me admit that I have many reservations about going to war against Iraq that I might offer simply as a citizen concerned about the governance of this country. But what truly overwhelms me is how this going to war corrupts the understanding and the practices of the Christians who support going to war. How does this happen?

I am really interested in, not so much what it means to be a citizen of the US in time of war, but **what it means to be Disciples of Christ in time of war.** My suspicion is that we Disciples—having spent generations fleeing from the central questions of who Jesus is and what it means to call him Savior and Lord—simply have no means to fend off the overwhelming power of the state when it identifies enemies, arms itself for war, and then goes to war. **Our language in the church is already so wishy-washy about Jesus Christ that we do not know how in crisis times to actually be the church of Jesus Christ.** And when we are unclear and confused, then what the NT refers to as the principalities and powers of the world in our land will tell us who really is lord over history and his name is legion and his armies are dominating and to be feared by all the peoples of the world. **The practical reality seems to be that the real lord for Christians, time and time again, is the politics of the nation-state and the maintenance of its dominating power and supremacy in relation to other states and over the lives of its own citizens.** At the core of its power is the coercive use of violence and the credible willingness to use superior violence to preserve the state's power and supremacy. It is upon the state that we rely for security and the preservation of our preferred styles of life. The discourses and practices of patriotism, with its overweening passion, shape us in times of crisis much more radically than the discourses and practices of a church called into existence by Jesus Christ.

What I want us to discuss and wrestle with today, then, is:

- 1) how we understand the Lordship of Jesus,
- 2) whether we have any shared sense about that Lordship,
- 3) and whether it means anything to confess that Lordship in a time of war and much violence.
- 4) I want us to converse about why we Disciples are not a peace church committed to Christian pacifism.
- 5) So, unless we just admit that we are primarily disciple/patriots of the United States and then, secondarily and for our own private reasons, disciples of Christ, I propose that we ask ourselves what we might mean when we say with our mouths that Jesus is Lord and Savior.
- 6) I am also open to discussing how just-war theory might relate to the Lordship of Jesus.

Selected Bibliography on Christianity and War

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Kenneth R. Chase and Alan Jacobs, eds., *Must Christianity Be Violent? Reflections on History, Practice, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003).

Christ Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002). Excruciating reflections on war by a journalist who has covered several wars in the last two decades.

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Further

For a more complete discussion of Christology and the Christian life, see my systematic theology: Joe R. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine*, 2 vols.

(Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), esp. chapters 7, 8, 10.

For further shorter pieces on Jesus and the Christian life, see also my web site: www.grammaroffaith.com

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