

# The Crucified One Is *Lord*

*Confessing the  
Uniqueness of Christ  
in a Pluralist Society*

## CONTENTS

The Crucified One Is Lord: Confessing the Uniqueness of Christ in a Pluralist Society . . . .5	
Study Guide . . . . .	27
What Do We Believe about Jesus Christ? . . . . .	28
How Do We Interpret and Live Out These Beliefs in a Pluralistic World? . . . . .	30
Fears about the Use and Abuse of Authority . . . . .	30
The Challenge of Religious Pluralism in a Post- Christian Context . . . . .	32
Public Witness in a Pluralistic World . . . . .	33
How Are We to Understand the Implications of the Lordship of Christ for Adherents of Other Religions? . . . .35	
Can Christians Learn from Other Religions? . . . . .	35
Salvation and Other Religions . . . . .	38
Salvation in the Name of Jesus . . . . .	39
The Ongoing Challenge . . . . .	40

"The Crucified One Is Lord" was approved by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America in 2000. The General Synod directed its Commission on Theology to develop a study guide to accompany the paper and to distribute it to the churches (*MGS 2000*, R-27 and R-28, p. 139).

© 2002 REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA  
ADDITIONAL COPIES OF THIS BOOKLET CAN BE  
DOWNLOADED FROM THE RCA WEBSITE  
([WWW.RCA.ORG](http://WWW.RCA.ORG)) IN PDF FORMAT.

Permission is granted to reproduce any portion  
of this booklet for use in your congregation.

# THE CRUCIFIED ONE IS LORD

## Confessing the Uniqueness of Christ in a Pluralist Society

The earliest and most basic of all Christian confessions is the acclamation, "Jesus is Lord" (e.g., Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11; 1 Cor. 12:3; 2 Cor. 4:5). To confess "Jesus is Lord" expresses a number of important understandings and commitments. It is first of all a recognition of God's unique activity and presence in Jesus of Nazareth. The term Lord, although it is used in many different ways in the Bible, is used throughout the Bible in distinctive ways to refer to God's own being. The Hebrew equivalent *adon*, "Lord," is the regular word used in normal speech to speak of God in the Old Testament. When the full scope of New Testament usages are carefully analyzed, it becomes clear that to say that Jesus is Lord is to attribute to Jesus the same sovereign power and authority that we attribute to God.<sup>1</sup> Therefore to say "Jesus is Lord" is to point to what we believe about who Jesus is, that he is not only "fully human," but also that he is "true God from true God," to use the more developed language of the Nicene Creed.

But to say that Jesus is Lord is not merely to affirm his deity; it is also to make the claim that every human authority is finally subject to Jesus. Even though the world may not acknowledge it yet, every governing official, every religious leader, indeed every human claim to authority must finally acknowledge the authority of Christ (Phil. 2:10-11; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 11:15, 19:16). This confession has throughout the ages been the backbone of Christian resistance to evil and the hope that has sustained the church through its darkest hours.

This means that the statement "Jesus is Lord" not only conveys certain information about Jesus; it also expresses a whole range of commitments, values, and intentions of the community that gathers under this confession. To make this statement is like reciting a pledge of allegiance. It acknowledges Jesus as our Lord, and expresses the hope that Christians will see Jesus' lordship extend and be acknowledged over the whole earth.

Moreover, the confession "Jesus is Lord" is the response evoked from us when we experience the power of God made available to us in the name of Jesus. As we experience healing, forgiveness, release from the power of evil, and new life breaking into our lives, our hearts cry out in praise and adoration, "Jesus is Lord!" For Christians, the confession "Jesus is Lord" is an expression of the Spirit's work in our lives, as the power of God awakens in us the awareness of where our help really

comes from. This is why the Bible declares that no one can say “Jesus is Lord” apart from the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3).

This confession of the lordship of Christ is thus a response to the saving work that Christ accomplished on our behalf. We acclaim Jesus as Lord not only because of who he is, but also because of what he has done. Indeed, we discover fully who he is only when we realize all that he has done: he has revealed God’s love and purpose for humanity in his life and teachings; he has redeemed us through his sacrificial death; he has triumphed over the power of sin and death in the resurrection; he has ascended to the right hand of the Father, where he continues to enliven the church through the Holy Spirit given in his name; and he will come again in judgment to blot out evil and restore the whole creation. Revelation 5:9 points powerfully to this celebration of Christ’s work:

You are worthy to take the scroll

and to open its seals,

for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God  
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation.

Jesus is Lord because it is his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and final return that restores creation, providing salvation for all those whom God has chosen to redeem.

Moreover, the churches of the Reformation have consistently emphasized that Christ is both necessary and entirely sufficient for salvation. The Reformed emphasis on *solus Christus* (“Christ alone”) reminds us that there is no other mediator between God and humankind. This focus upon Christ alone is closely related to Reformed emphases on *sola gratiae* (“grace alone”) and *sola fide* (“faith alone”), which underscore the necessity and sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf and the necessity and sufficiency of faith in Christ, without reliance on human works. Even the doctrine of *sola scriptura* (“Scripture alone”) draws its basic rationale from the unique role of Scripture in its witness to Christ.

## **HOW DO WE INTERPRET AND LIVE OUT THESE BELIEFS IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD?**

While almost all Christians continue to celebrate this confession as their personal belief, some Christians have become uncomfortable asserting it in the “public square.” Some are not so sure any more whether this confession can be held as true, not just for oneself, but with the whole world in view. There are a variety of reasons for this unease. Changes in our culture have called into question whether any-

one can claim to know any truth that transcends one's own context and experience. Past abuses committed by the church ostensibly in the name of the lordship of Jesus—from the Crusades to the Inquisition to slavery to a silent acquiescence in the Holocaust—have given some Christians pause about the way this confession should be used in the public arena. In addition, we find ourselves encountering adherents of other religions with increasing frequency in North America. Such contacts often raise questions about the uniqueness of Jesus and the exclusive claims made by Christians. It is important to explore these reasons for discomfort, and to discern how the church can constructively address them. How can we open up fresh perspectives on this ancient confession, which may enable the church to confess it with new conviction, sensitivity, and clarity? In our exploration, we shall pay particular attention to the *function* of confessing "Jesus is Lord" in addition to the *content* of that confession. That is, we shall be concerned with those assumptions and practices that surround our confession and bring its implications into engagement with the world around us. We want to concern ourselves with the concrete differences it makes in our lives and in our culture when we rightly confess that Jesus is Lord.

### Fears about the Use and Abuse of Authority

To speak about Christ's lordship is to speak about *authority*. In our culture, however, this is a subject of great controversy. People from a variety of theological perspectives have questioned the language of lordship and authority in its application to God or to Christ. It has been argued that such terms are outmoded, reflecting a patriarchal and hierarchical society very different from the democratic egalitarianism of contemporary life. When the church honestly examines itself, it must acknowledge that this language has at times been used, even in the church, to condone oppressive relationships that reflect nothing of the Spirit of Christ.

Yet to reject this language entirely on the basis of these abuses is to confuse a distorted reflection with the true reality. It is also a failure to understand the distinctive way in which the confession of the lordship of Jesus functioned in the ancient church. Far from being used to legitimate human hierarchies and patriarchies, the confession of Jesus' lordship was used to relativize and critique all such human structures of authority. For example, Matthew 23:9 states, "call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven." In Acts 5:29, when the disciples are ordered by the religious authorities to be silent, Peter responds, "We must obey God rather than any human authority." In both these examples, God's authority supersedes and relativizes all

human authority.<sup>2</sup> The same is true in the book of Revelation, where the lordship of Jesus is the starting point for resistance to a cruel and oppressive Roman Empire claiming power and lordship for itself. To confess that Jesus is Lord is not to give sanction to human authority, but to subject it to a penetrating critique that challenges any claim to authority apart from or different from the authority of the Christ who gave himself for the life of the world. Jesus turns the authoritarian and patriarchal world of his day on its head by declaring “The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Matt. 23:11-12). To confess the lordship of Jesus is radically to redefine what lordship and authority mean in the first place! It is to embrace as our rule and guide the distinctive way in which Jesus embodies authority.

At the core of the Bible’s understanding of authority is its affirmation of divine grace. Even the creation itself is expressive of God’s gracious authority; God speaks, and the things that are not must respond and come into existence (Rom. 4:17). The world is sustained by the gracious decrees that proceed from the throne of God (Is. 55:10-11). Yet this authority never expresses itself in domination, but rather in service (Luke 22:25-27). It is difficult to underestimate the significance of the graciousness of divine authority. God’s authority gives life, it forgives and renews, it encourages diversity while binding people to each other.

Throughout human history, authority and power have usually been won by shedding the blood of others. But Jesus is acclaimed as Lord precisely because he has shed his own blood on behalf of the world. To say that Jesus is Lord without recognizing this distinctive understanding of gracious divine lordship is gravely to misunderstand the Christian confession.

This combination of authority, power, and self-giving is seen most clearly at those points where Jesus’ claim to authority appears strongest. Consider John 14:6, where Jesus states, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” One can scarcely imagine a more exclusive claim to authority. Yet the “way” of which Jesus speaks in this text is precisely the “way” of suffering and death (cf. 13:36, 14:3). It is because Jesus establishes and models this “way” of self-offering that he is also “truth” and “life.” In other words, Jesus’ claim to be the sole mediator of salvation derives from the uniqueness of his self-offering in death. Self-offering, power, and authority always come wrapped up in each other.<sup>3</sup>

This is not to say that divine authority never challenges, confronts, or

judges. The same Jesus who gave himself for his enemies also challenged them, rebuked them, and warned them of God's judgment. But the judgment that Scripture speaks of is always in the service of grace. It is carried out by a God who loves this world more deeply than we can imagine, and whose wrath therefore will not allow anything in all creation finally to deny, demean, or destroy the love of God revealed in Christ, the love that energizes the whole creation and holds the universe together.

When we recognize this distinctive *function* of the confession "Jesus is Lord" in the early church, it raises some important issues surrounding how we make our confession of the lordship of Jesus. It is possible for us today to be entirely "orthodox," saying all the right words, but to do so in a way that attempts to establish the privilege and superiority of the church rather than to call the church and the world to discipleship in Jesus' way. It is not enough to be clear on what we should say; we need also to be clear on how we should make use of that confession in the life of the church.

### The Challenge of Religious Pluralism in a Post-Christian Context

This leads to another challenge that is often heard today to the confession "Jesus is Lord." Some have argued that to confess that Jesus is Lord is arrogantly to presume that Christians have a monopoly on the truth. Here the complaint centers not on the notion of lordship or authority; it focuses upon the way in which Christians attribute final authority only to Jesus of Nazareth, not just for themselves, but for the whole world. The same complaint is heard in many variations: "It's OK for you to believe in Jesus, but you have no right to impose your beliefs upon others." "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere." "Every religion has important truth in it, and you can't say one is better than another." "There are many paths up the same mountain, but they all reach the same top. There are many religions, but they all are saying basically the same thing." "How can you claim to know more about God than anyone else?"

All these comments, diverse as they are, share a common resistance to the confession "Jesus is Lord." In each case, the final and public allegiance to Jesus' lordship grates against the pluralism and individualism so deeply embedded in North American religious consciousness. Most people prefer that religion be kept private—out of the public sphere—and that it be kept humble and subservient, never claiming access to any truth or authority that might impinge upon others.



In one sense, the resistance of the dominant culture to the confession “Jesus is Lord” is as old as Christian faith itself. The early Christian martyrs were not put to death simply for believing in Jesus; they were put to death because they would not take part in the imperial cult of Rome. That is, they were not willing to regard their own religious beliefs and practices as part of an eclectic smorgasbord in the way most religions did. Rome was remarkably tolerant of a wide range of religions, as long as they made no claims to ultimate authority nor demanded final allegiance. But the early Christians wouldn’t go along with that. For them, to say that Jesus is Lord was to say that Jesus represented both the rule by which all other religions should be assessed (including the imperial cult), and the allegiance that superseded every other loyalty (including loyalty to the emperor). That allegiance cost many of them their lives.

Although resistance to the claim that Jesus is Lord is not new, our own culture has distinctive reasons for resisting this confession—reasons that we must try to understand. To do so, we must first go back to the period following the Reformation, when the so-called “wars of religion” tore Europe apart in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. By the time the Peace of Westphalia was concluded and these wars brought to a close in 1648, much of Europe was physically, economically, and culturally devastated. This anguish over religious conflict paved the way in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for approaches to the relationship between religion and public life which increasingly moved religion out of the public sphere and into the realm of subjectivity and private life. The implicit assumption driving much of this change was the belief that religion, when it acquires too much power, becomes explosive and divisive. Europe had come to that conclusion through the hard knocks of experience.

This disenchantment with a public role for religion was furthered by developments in the Enlightenment during the eighteenth century. Not only did political thought during the Enlightenment increasingly separate the role of church and state, but the empiricism and rationalism of the Enlightenment drew an increasingly sharp opposition between religion and science. Empiricism stated that our only access to truth is through the five senses; rationalism insisted that truth must be based upon reason alone, rather than faith. Because religion could not be empirically or rationally proven, it was relegated even more decisively to the realm of private opinion and feeling rather than to public truth. In this context, to say that Jesus is Lord might be meaningful as an expression of one’s own feeling or belief. Yet since such a statement could not be empirically or rationally proven, it would be meaningless as an affirmation of public, objective truth that might make a claim on others or on the world as a whole. Ironically, the intensely inward and

subjective character of the pietistic heritage of much American Christianity has often played directly into the hands of this public-private split in the function of religion.

The twentieth century, however, brought about a weakening in the Enlightenment's confidence in empiricism and rationality. The most scientifically advanced societies in the world almost brought themselves to extinction in two world wars, horrible beyond belief. In the late twentieth century our own postmodern context is suspicious, not only of religion, but of reason as well. More and more our culture is coming to the belief that all knowledge, both religious and scientific, is partial and provisional. We have come to recognize the ways in which reason itself is often merely a tool driven by the deeper and darker forces of ethnocentrism, greed, and the will to power.

And so in our own culture we are beginning to extend the same suspicions toward other social institutions that have long been directed toward the church. Our culture increasingly is suspicious of *all* claims to objective truth and all final allegiances. On almost any subject, people are encouraged to keep their opinions to themselves and to avoid the mortal sin of imposing their beliefs on anyone else. We are a deeply suspicious people.

This emphasis on the provisional and tentative character of our knowledge is further intensified by our increasingly pluralistic society. Economic developments, immigration, and changes in communications and travel technologies cause us to be exposed to many different kinds of people, more so than ever before. We work and go to school with Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and adherents of many other religions. We are confronted almost daily by people who believe differently from us, and these people are often decent and respectable. Sometimes they may even strike us as admirable, embracing societal values we share or even religious ideals to which we may also aspire.

This loss of a public role for the church, combined with increasing contact with adherents of other religions, places the church in a new social position that often feels uncomfortable for us. In the past, Christian faith appeared to have influence in the society as a whole. We still have long-established memories of a European Christendom where the church played a central role in society. Now North American Christians ironically are finding themselves increasingly in the same position as Christians in many other parts of the world: they are a minority faith, often with little respect or status in the dominant culture, competing in a wide-open marketplace of diverse religions. Christendom—that mutually reinforcing alliance of religious institutions and public, secular power—is dead.

These changes in our world and in our own experience pose fresh challenges to the church. The deepest challenge, however, is not from outside, but from within. These social and cultural changes have affected us as Christians. We are not always as confident as we once were. Our privileged place in society as religious leaders is increasingly questioned. Our own patterns of thinking have been deeply influenced by the culture around us. There are many who are willing to acknowledge Jesus as their “personal Lord and Savior” but are not sure whether this confession has public significance for their neighbors and the world as a whole as well. They are hesitant to “impose” their beliefs on others. They are reluctant to suggest that their own beliefs might be superior to or more true than the beliefs of others, especially when they suspect that their own moral behavior and that of their fellow Christians is not always superior to the morality of adherents of other religions.

### Public Witness in a Pluralistic World

How then do we bear witness to the lordship of Christ from this new social location? We are increasingly a minority faith, relegated to the sidelines of many public debates. Our confession of the universal lordship of Christ seems to many quaint at best, and at worst a threat to the pluralistic fabric of our society. Some Christians, particularly in the United States, respond to this situation by longing for and working for a reassertion of Christendom, where the church works hand-in-hand with government to influence public life. If we can only again seize the reins of power, they argue, we can reassert our nation’s historic Christian identity and reestablish the credibility of the church’s witness to the lordship of Christ.

Yet thoughtful Christians are increasingly questioning this approach. The rise of religious pluralism and the peripheral position of the church in our culture as a whole need not be seen only as a failure and a loss. In many respects, it can be seen as a fresh opportunity for the church. We may be in a situation today that is closer to that of the New Testament church than ever before. As we are freed from the false security of being an established religion and forced to compete in a wide-open marketplace of ideas and perspectives, the Holy Spirit may be opening an opportunity for renewal and transformation in the church, leading us into a fresh and deeper witness to the world, a witness undergirded not by the status and prestige of the institutional church, not by smarter politics, better marketing, or more money, but by the quality and character of our lives. Christians all over the world have been living and thriving as minority faiths in such pluralistic contexts, and they have much to teach us.

Even in a pluralistic world, the reality that no one can deny is the transformation of human lives into the image of Christ. Perhaps more than ever before, the church is called to witness to the gracious and transforming lordship of Christ through a blended witness of word and deed. If our faith does not transform our lives to reflect Jesus Christ, no one will listen to us. If we do not find creative ways both to point to and to exhibit the radical, shocking, and subversive love of Christ, no one will pay any attention to us at all. But once we gain their attention, if we do not tell them the story of Jesus and challenge them to faith and discipleship, our witness will not bear fruit.

In the middle of this century, when the church still had a certain measure of public prestige, the style of evangelism was built around large crusades and the invitation to “come and listen.” In our day the challenge must be “come, see, and learn.” In our pluralistic world, people must often first see the transforming power of Jesus’ lordship, and then they will learn the way of faith—often not in a one-time decision, but gradually, over a period of time. This process of conversion is no less a work of the Holy Spirit. It is the same Spirit who energizes our witness in word and deed. It is the same Spirit who speaks both through the words of the preacher and through the life of the church.<sup>4</sup>

This means as well that the church must pay very careful attention to the formation of Christian identity and maturity in its members. We live in a society where the supports for Christian faith and life are crumbling. To choose to live as a Christian requires intentional commitment. We must learn to recognize the powers in our world that continually undermine and subvert Christian faith and commitment. We must find fresh ways of encouraging each other to stand as lights in a dark world, of picking each other up when we fall, of supporting each other in the radical and subversive act of confessing Jesus as Lord.

### **HOW ARE WE TO UNDERSTAND THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST FOR ADHERENTS OF OTHER RELIGIONS?**

The challenges of pluralism come to a particular focus when the question of salvation is raised, particularly with reference to adherents of other religions. In the context of a pluralistic culture in which the provisionality of all knowledge is assumed, it becomes harder for many Christians to affirm that Jesus is Lord of the whole world and that salvation is found in Jesus alone. In our time it is becoming increasingly popular to adopt a general approval of all religions, a view that assumes that all religions are expressions of the same basic

human quest for God. By this view, all religions that are sincerely followed are capable of mediating salvation to their adherents.

Yet such a perspective, as gracious and magnanimous as it may appear, is both highly questionable on its own grounds and incompatible with the central affirmations of Christian faith. It must first be asked, "How do we *know* that all religions are capable of mediating salvation to their adherents? What kind of evidence or arguments might be advanced to support such a position?" When pressed, it becomes clear that this position is in reality little more than wishful assertion, and it has little, if any, clear evidence or argumentation to support it.

When examined closely, it is not at all clear that all religions are trying to achieve the same sort of salvation. Indeed, many careful scholars of comparative religion have emphasized the degree to which different religions conceive of salvation itself in very different ways. Only by the most reductionistic and simplistic analysis can it be said that all religions express the same quest for God or offer the same salvation. It is by no means certain that all religions are even attempting to mediate salvation in the way that Christians think of the concept.

But from a Christian perspective, there is an even deeper problem. Such a general approval of all religions cannot be reconciled with the message of Jesus. Jesus came proclaiming, "the Reign (or Kingdom) of God is at hand."<sup>5</sup> In so doing, Jesus was not simply stating that something interesting or unusual was in the offing. That phrase "the Reign of God" evokes all the hopes and dreams of the people of God for God's final redemption of Israel and the whole world. When Jesus declared that the Reign of God was coming in his ministry, he meant that all of God's saving purposes for the whole world were coming to their climax and fruition in his ministry. Jesus never claimed to be opening one new path to God amidst many others; he claimed that in his ministry, God's saving purpose for the whole world was coming to its culmination (cf. Matt. 24:14).

This emphasis on the Reign of God points to an even more fundamental challenge to the assumption that all religions lead to the same goal. The most basic metaphor for the popular view of religions is the image of paths up the mountain. This view assumes that there are many paths to God and that each of us must find the path that is best for us. But note two important features of this metaphor. First, God is passive, waiting to be found at the top of the mountain. Secondly, human beings are the active ones, climbing up the mountain, struggling as best they can to find God, in an enterprise that

requires a great expenditure of effort. The great drama of history, in this view, is this: how and when will humans ever make it to the top of the mountain to find God?

The biblical view, summarized in the message of Jesus, is quite the opposite. The great drama of history is not how humans will find God; it is rather when and how an active, seeking God will finally get through to a resistant humanity. When Jesus declared that the Reign of God was at hand, he was not claiming to open a new path to God; he was claiming that God was blazing a new path to us in Jesus. Christian faith is, in the final analysis, not about our going to God, but about God's coming to us in Christ. Christian faith is not about discovering God; it is the experience of having been found, despite our resistance and rebellion, by a God in search of us: "The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Christian faith is incompatible with a general affirmation of all religions because of a fundamental difference in understanding what religion is.<sup>6</sup> For Christians, it is not our quest for God, but our response to God's quest for us in Christ.

Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the cross of Christ. Here is the moment where God meets us in all our rebellion, resistance, idolatry, and violence. At precisely the point where humanity is most resistant to God, the love of God shines most brightly, overcoming our rebellion, forgiving our violence, and inviting us into a new way of living. Christianity's distinguishing mark is not that we are seekers who have found God; we are sinners—enemies of God whom God has loved and forgiven. Christianity is about grace, from beginning to end.

Consequently, Christians do not so much claim to have discovered the truth as to have been apprehended by the truth. Their great joy comes not so much from what they have found, but from the fact that they have been found by God. Their concern is not so much with the wisdom they have acquired, but with the Wise One who has drawn them to himself. If all Christians had to offer was another spirituality, another ethic, another path to fulfillment, Christianity would indeed be just one of many religions. But this is not the heart of the gospel. The gospel affirms that at the center of reality is the living, resurrected Jesus Christ, at work in the world through the Holy Spirit; everything else flows from this living person who has gripped the hearts and minds of those who call themselves Christian.

### Can Christians Learn from Other Religions?

Because the gospel is centrally concerned with God's grace in the midst

of human failure, Christian faith manifests a distinctive combination of confidence and humility. True faith is confident enough of God's gift in Christ to commend Jesus Christ to the whole world and to risk all in trusting Jesus. But Christian confidence is based, not on our grasp upon God, but on God's grasp upon us. We don't understand or know everything—far from it! But we are known by the One who does. Our only comfort (and confidence) is that “we are not our own.” This combination of humility and confidence means that Christians expect humbly to learn from others, even non-Christians. Christians acknowledge every week their own sinfulness, limitations, and shortcomings before God and the world in the confession of their sins in public worship. But everything that Christians learn is set in the context of the central confidence that defines Christian life at its core: We are not our own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful savior, Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Christians look at other religions from this dual perspective. Because other religions do not recognize the unique way in which God has come to us in Christ, they participate in the bondage of all humanity that can only be broken through God's mercy revealed in Christ. Paul speaks of those apart from God's gracious covenant as “having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). These words are in keeping with a long biblical tradition that exposes the futility of idolatry and the diverse ways in which human religious activity is not so much a seeking after God as an avoidance of the true God who comes to us in promise and judgment (e.g., Isa. 44:6-20). Insofar as other religions do not recognize who Jesus is and what he has done, they lack the joyful assurance of reconciliation with God that stands at the heart of the gospel. This they need to hear, and all the church's evangelistic efforts are rightly directed to that end. Without this discovery, no other form of religious life can bring assurance of salvation. We have something vitally important to share with other religions.

But that does not mean that other religions have nothing to share with us. There is another perspective that Scripture and the Reformed tradition provide as well. Reformed theology has always acknowledged that something of God's truth can be known through the natural world. Article II of the Belgic Confession states:

We know [God] by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see clearly the invisible things of God, even his everlasting power and divinity, as the apostle Paul says (Rom.

1:20). All which things are sufficient to convince men and leave them without excuse.

Reformed theology denies that God's self-revelation available in creation and culture is sufficient to bring us to salvation because it takes seriously the depths of human resistance to God. We do not respond appropriately to God's self-revelation in the world around us. We twist and distort it to our own idolatrous purposes. But the knowledge of God is nonetheless available in the natural world and is reflected in many religious traditions, partial and distorted though it may be.

A good example of this is found in Acts 17:16ff., where Paul identifies the altar "to an unknown god" as a groping after God, and says, "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (vs. 23). Paul goes on to cite several Greek poets as pointers to the truth found in the gospel. Of course, Paul never suggested that the religious perspectives he found in Athens were sufficient to bring about the true and complete knowledge of God. They are pointers to the truth, not the truth itself. Their value for Paul lies in their capacity to point people to the gospel of Christ. Yet in this capacity, they have real value. Paul's sermon illustrates a broad theme found throughout Scripture. Melchizedek and Jethro, the father of Moses, stand outside the covenant community and yet are channels through whom God instructs his people. Much of the wisdom in Proverbs 22:17 to 24:34 bears close affinities to Egyptian wisdom documented from other sources. Isaiah declares that Cyrus of Persia is God's anointed who has been raised up to do God's will (Isa. 45:1).

The same understanding has repeated itself frequently in the history of the church. Many of our cherished Christian practices were originally borrowed and adapted from non-Christian religions. Christmas trees find their origin in northern European pagan practice. Even the date of Christmas coincides closely with a pagan Roman festival devoted to the sun god. Rather than denying any truth or value in such practices, the church saw them as early pointers to the gospel and incorporated them under the banner of the lordship of Christ, always making sure that they pointed clearly to Christ. Christians don't deny that there is truth or value in other religions or that God works through other cultures. Rather, Christian faith simply declares that *all* religions (including the Christian church in a continual way) must respond to what God has done, in sending his Son into the world and in calling all to respond in faith to him.

This means that Christians should always expect, not only to teach, but also to learn in their encounters with adherents of other religions.



Yet we often find it very difficult both to teach and to learn. Sometimes we become so driven to challenge people with the gospel and to call them to repentance that we fail to see the remarkable ways in which the Holy Spirit is already at work in their lives and even in aspects of their religious heritage. The result is a self-righteous posture that does little to commend the gospel winsomely. Others become so captivated by the pluralist spirit of the age that they lose sight of the transforming power of Christ and the urgency and necessity of challenging people with the gospel at all. The result is a veneer of tolerance that conceals a calloused indifference to the suffering and spiritual confusion of many. Neither extreme is faithful to Scripture. We have a wonderful gift to offer in the life-giving power of the gospel. But we can also learn from other religions. The artistry of faithful witness is to learn how to do both together.

What does it mean for Christians to learn from other religions? There are several ways in which that learning takes place. Sometimes other religions challenge us to embrace more deeply the implications of our own faith. The regularity of the prayer life of our Muslim neighbors may confront us with the infrequency of prayer in our own lives. The interest in the spiritual world among Native Americans may confront us with our own materialism and indifference to the Spirit of God. The celebrative affirmation of the law in Judaism may challenge our own cheap grace that fails to see God's law as a gracious gift. In all these ways and many others, dialogue with other religions may help us to become more truly and deeply Christian.

Other religions may also teach us fresh wisdom that is entirely in keeping with the gospel of Christ. In acknowledging this, the church must also acknowledge the danger of diluting or distorting Christian faith with practices or beliefs incompatible with the gospel. All things must be tested by the Scriptures and by the Spirit at work in the Christian community. Yet Christians around the world are finding architectural forms, meditative techniques, rituals, and patterns of worship in other religious and cultural traditions that are not only compatible with the gospel of Christ, but enable the gospel to be expressed more beautifully and powerfully in the lives of people.

There is also a third way—perhaps the most important of all—in which Christians can learn from adherents of other religions. This is not a learning of concepts, or beliefs, or practices, or values. It is rather the learning of *persons*, motivated by the love of God. We rarely encounter religions in the abstract. We encounter people, with their own culture, history, relationships, and values. We encounter *people* deeply loved by

God, whom God also calls us to love. And love is always hospitable and open to the other. Love not only gives the gift of the gospel, but receives the gift of the other in turn, with care and gratitude. In the mystery of the work of the gospel, our capacity deeply to listen to and to learn from others will be directly related to their capacity to hear from us and accept the truth of Christ.

Learning from other religions and witnessing to the uniqueness of Christ are therefore not competing or incompatible options. Rather, they must be understood as complementary and mutually reinforcing activities. Christians who will not learn from other religions will easily become arrogant and will find it increasingly difficult to gain a hearing with adherents of other religions. Christians who fail to witness to Christ's uniqueness will easily become indifferent to the plight of those "having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). But those who can listen as well as teach, who can affirm as well as challenge in their encounters with other religions, are often used by God in remarkable ways to heal religious strife, to bring some justice and wholeness to a pluralist world, and to lead many people to the good news of God's remarkable love in Jesus Christ.

### Salvation and Other Religions

But what of salvation? Should Christians claim that there is no salvation apart from those who explicitly confess Jesus as Lord and Savior? In order fully to answer that question, a number of preliminary comments are necessary. First, Reformed theology has always taught that salvation is ultimately in God's hands, beyond the pale of human understanding. Calvin states, "We must leave to God alone the knowledge of his church, whose foundation is his secret election" (*Institutes*, IV.1.2).

A basic posture of humility should characterize all discussions of the scope of salvation. Christians claim not to have mastered the truth, but to have been mastered by it, and thus should be cautious about claiming to know too much of God's saving ways. God is greater than we, and we ought not to claim to know all of God's saving plan. While the Scriptures call us to discern between good and evil and between truth and falsehood, they also repeatedly caution against judging—that is, against attempting to determine the ultimate destiny of any person (Matt. 7:1; Luke 6:37; Rom. 2:1, 14:10; 1 Cor. 4:5; James 4:12). It is sufficient for us to be guided by the Scriptures which led us to Christ, affirming what seems clear and remaining silent where Scripture itself speaks with less clarity or finality. To probe too deeply into these mat-

ters is to subject oneself to grave spiritual danger, assuming knowledge and authority that rightly belong to God alone.

Secondly, it is important that we think of salvation in the broad biblical sense and not simply as a ticket to heaven. According to the Bible, salvation is, in the deepest sense, our covenantal response to God's initiative. God comes to us to restore our relationship with God and with the creation, beginning here and now and extending into eternity (2 Cor. 5:18-19). Hence, for Christians it is meaningless to suggest that people will be saved unless this salvation actually begins to be experienced concretely in their lives in the present. To speak of salvation without also speaking of repentance, the freedom of the Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, participation in the redeemed community, and the transformation toward a new and holy life is to speak of a meaningless salvation, abstract and devoid of content. To claim that salvation is present where these realities are not experienced is for Christians to strip salvation of most of its content. If Christians' discussions of salvation tend to become otherworldly at times, it may reflect the loss of a firm grip on what it means to be a redeemed community in the here and now.

Thirdly, we must remember that salvation has to do ultimately not only with individuals, but with the restoration of the whole creation. The salvation won in Christ comes to its culmination at the judgment seat of Christ, when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, when swords will be beaten into plowshares, when the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and when justice will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. Hence when we think about the salvation for which we hope, we must not only consider how individuals will stand at that great and terrible day. We must also consider how and where the Spirit of God is already bringing to light the seeds of justice and peace that will come to flower when Jesus Christ restores all of creation to God's intention.

Finally, it is important to remember that the Bible always links salvation (in its full scope, present and future, personal and corporate) with faith in God's gift and promise. Without faith there is no knowledge of God and no salvation (Heb. 11:6; Eph. 2:8). But faith must not be construed as a "work," as something we do that wins God's favor. Faith is not a precondition for God's grace; it is a work of God's grace. The whole process by which faith emerges is under God's gracious providence.<sup>8</sup> Faith is the other side of the coin of salvation. It is not only the grateful receiving of God's salvation, but also the fruit of that salvation. To discover God's surprising mercy in Christ and to place one's trust in

that mercy that reconciles us to God and to one another *is*, in itself, the experience of salvation (cf. Luke 19:9). Christians say that there is no salvation apart from faith because faith is itself our grateful receiving of salvation and our joyful entry into the redeemed community. A salvation that is not so received is no salvation at all.

### Salvation in the Name of Jesus

With these preliminary considerations, we turn to the question of the place of Jesus Christ in the salvation of persons. Is explicit faith in Jesus as Lord necessary for salvation, or is it possible that adherents of other religions will also be saved? What does the Bible say about this, and can the Bible's perspective make sense for us today?

The Bible makes some very strong statements about the centrality of faith in Christ for salvation. Jesus declares in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." In Acts 4:12, Peter says, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." In Romans 10:9, Paul affirms, "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Clearly, the central affirmation of the New Testament is that God extends his salvation to the world through Christ. The Bible does not say that God comes to us in many ways to save; it affirms that God's salvation has come to us "in the fullness of time" in Christ. Hebrews 1:1-2 speaks of how God long ago spoke "in many and various ways," but that "in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds." One can scarcely imagine a more central role for Jesus in God's saving purpose for the world. Christian faith is absolutely clear: Jesus is God's definitive word—the only savior.

But what if the name of Jesus is not known? Must Jesus be explicitly named in order for salvation to be experienced? On this subject, the Bible speaks with a clear central message. The central message and emphasis of Scripture falls upon the centrality and significance of the name of Jesus and the hearing of the gospel. Paul summarizes this theme in Romans 10:14:

But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed?  
And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?  
And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?

Paul bears witness here to the passion that drives the whole New Testament church: the passion to make Christ known. Such passion is incomprehensible apart from the conviction that the name of Jesus is critical to the experience of salvation. Paul believed that God intends people to find salvation through the name of Jesus. He believed that Jesus was God's Messiah, the one appointed to bring salvation to the world. Along with the entire New Testament church, Paul believed that the means by which God has chosen to bring salvation to the world is the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is the mandate given to the church, to be the agents through whom God extends his salvation to the world, through witness to Jesus Christ in word and deed. There is no assurance of salvation revealed to us apart from confessing Christ and trusting in him alone. Yet the church also must confess that it does not know the limits of God's grace. We cannot be certain that God will not impart saving faith in Christ, even perhaps where his name is not explicitly known. Throughout Christian history the great confessions of the church have affirmed with clarity that our salvation is found in Christ alone, while at the same time exercising restraint in determining too sharply the extent of that salvation or how God may bring people to a saving relationship with Christ.

The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, an important and widely used Reformed confession, allows that God can save in ways other than through the preaching of the Word. After arguing that "the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God" (no low doctrine of preaching here), the confession goes on to state, "We know, in the meantime, that God can illuminate whom and when he will, even without the external ministry, which is a thing appertaining to his power; but we speak of the usual way of instructing men, delivered unto us from God, both by commandment and examples."<sup>9</sup>

In an analogous move, the Westminster Confession states, "Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth. *So also are all other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.*"<sup>10</sup> The confession goes on immediately to rule out the notion that such a belief might be used to argue for the salvation of all non-Christians: "much less can men, not professing the Christian religion, be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature and the law of that religion they do profess."<sup>11</sup> The Westminster Confession thus walks a middle road, rejecting both the idea that other

religions can mediate salvation and the notion that only those who are “capable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word” can be elect. It is also worth noting that the confession walks this middle road specifically out of a desire to preserve both the necessity of the gospel of Christ for salvation, and also the freedom of God to work “when, where, and how he pleaseth.”

Calvin emphasizes primarily the necessity for explicit faith in Christ and rejects any idea that salvation is mediated through means other than the gospel of Christ. Yet even Calvin held that though preaching is the “normal mode which the Lord has appointed for imparting His Word,” God’s saving ways cannot be restricted only to preaching. Commenting on Romans 10:14, Calvin writes,

If it is contended from this that God can instill a knowledge of Himself among men only by means of preaching, we shall deny that this was the meaning of the apostle. Paul was referring only to the ordinary dispensation of God, and had no desire to prescribe a law to His grace.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, Calvin observes, “It is enough to bear this fact alone in mind, that the Gospel does not fall from the clouds like rain, by accident, but is brought by the hands of men to where God has sent it.”<sup>13</sup>

These two streams that flow from the Reformation are both important. We must never lose sight of the centrality and necessity of the preaching of the gospel of Christ. On the other hand, the affirmation of divine freedom in passages like that found in the Second Helvetic Confession rightly cautions the church against arrogating to itself human control or complete knowledge of God’s saving work. In the face of a corrupt Roman church that had insisted on its own mastery over the mediation of salvation, the reformers insisted on the freedom of God and the freedom of the Word of God. The Reformed emphasis on the freedom of God provides an important caution, lest the church again be tempted to claim for itself control over God’s saving ways or too deep a knowledge of the extent of God’s salvation.

The relationship between divine freedom and God’s use of human agency is a mystery. It is wise for us to confess with conviction what God has revealed—that the only assurance of salvation revealed to us is found through explicit faith in Jesus Christ. At the same time it is also wise for us to avoid saying what we do not know—exactly

how God will deal with all those who have not heard or responded to the gospel. We do know that God is both completely gracious and completely just. That is enough for us. With Abraham we confess in hope, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen. 18:25).

When the church confesses that it does not know the limits of God's grace, however, this in no way weakens the urgency of its mandate to evangelism, its joyful responsibility to be heralds of the gospel to all the nations. The church can never smugly sit back and declare "God will somehow make it all right" when billions of people live and die in hopelessness, poverty, oppression, and despair, without the transforming and life-giving power of the gospel of Christ. We live in the hope that God will finally set all things right, but we also believe that the means God has chosen for this end is the preaching of the gospel of Christ in word and deed.

To be a Christian is to be entrusted with the gospel, with the commission of bringing God's light to the whole world. And yet it is finally God's gospel and God's mission, not ours. As a saint once quipped, we are to preach as if everything depended on our proclamation, and to pray as if everything depended upon God. To follow that advice is to preserve the Bible's emphasis on the necessity and centrality of the proclamation of the name of Jesus, while also recognizing that salvation is finally in God's hands and not in ours. And in any case, it is always Jesus who is the savior. He is God's Messiah; it is his sacrifice that has atoned for the sins of the world and reconciled believers to God.

## **THE ONGOING CHALLENGE**

But simply knowing this truth and believing it is not enough. In our society the Christian claims regarding the uniqueness of Christ and the necessity of salvation in Christ will immediately raise suspicions of arrogance and a fear of domination. In other parts of the world they raise painful memories of colonialism, forced conversion, and oppression. The church's history of confessing the lordship of Christ has not been without its failures. In subtle and powerful ways the church can be tempted to want to reign with Christ without following the path of Christ, the path of humble service. There is simply no place for self-congratulatory superiority in our pointing to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. At the same time there is no place for hesitancy, lack of confidence, or lack of conviction as the church points to Christ's uniqueness. If Christians really believe that the love of God revealed in Christ

is the only hope for this world, if they really believe that Jesus is “King of kings and Lord of lords,” then they cannot be silent about the claim of the gospel on the life of every person, every community, every culture. Christians who claim to have been transformed by the surprising love of Christ cannot and must not keep that love to themselves. If Jesus really is Lord, then his gracious lordship must be made known to all. No task is more central to the church’s mission.

But there is a world of difference between efforts to impose or coerce Christian faith and the gracious commending of Christian faith by words and lives that are empowered by the Spirit. The church will be able to point credibly to Jesus as the only savior of the whole world only if it makes that claim as a community that assumes a posture of humble service, if it seeks out the lowest places of service, and loves where no one else is willing to love. Only then will Christians be able to persuade the world that Jesus comes, not to destroy our cultures, but to renew them; not to reinforce patterns of domination, but to give life to all; not to negate our religious searching, but to show us the reality for which we have been longing; not to impose uniformity, but to bring many diverse gifts to full expression. If this is the Savior whom we have come to follow, we will indeed have good news not just for ourselves but for the whole world.

<sup>1</sup> For example, Phil. 2:10-11 states, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” When compared with Isaiah 45:23, where God is speaking, the similarity of the language is striking: “By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.’”

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Calvin’s Institutes, IV:XX:30-31, and the contemporary discussion in Richard Mouw’s study, *The God Who Commands* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> It is striking how many of the “I am” sayings of Jesus in the Gospel according to John combine an exclusive claim about Jesus’ status and authority with a pointer to his gracious self-offering. Jesus is the bread of life (6:35), and that bread is his flesh, offered up in death (6:51). When he claims to be the light of the world (9:5), he demonstrates that claim by giving sight to the blind man. When he claims to be the gate (10:9), and the good shepherd (10:11), he goes on to speak of laying



his life down for the sheep. When he identifies himself as the vine in whom the disciples must abide (15:1), he goes on in that same context to call them to lay down their lives for each other, just as he did for them (15:12-14).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Acts 2:37-47.

<sup>5</sup> Biblical scholars have recognized for some time that the Kingdom of God is not conceived in the New Testament primarily in spatial terms, but in terms of divine activity. The Kingdom of God is preeminently associated with God's royal action to save and to restore. Hence the translation "Reign of God."

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the technical discussion of the idea that different religions envision the nature of religion in dramatically different terms in S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*, (Orbis: Maryknoll, NY, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> The Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 1.

<sup>8</sup> The Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 61 states, "It is not because of any value my faith has that God is pleased with me. Only Christ's satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness make me right with God." Q&A 65 goes on to state, "Where does faith come from? The Holy Spirit produces it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it through the use of the holy sacraments." Eph. 2:8 makes it clear that the entire process of being saved by grace through faith is all "the gift of God."

<sup>9</sup> Chapter 1, tr. by Philip Schaff, reprinted in *Creeds of the Churches*, rev. ed., ed. by John Leith (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1973), p. 134.

<sup>10</sup> Chapter 10, section 3 (italics added).

<sup>11</sup> Chapter 10, section 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Commentary on Romans*, tr. by Ross Mackenzie, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 231.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

# **THE CRUCIFIED ONE IS LORD**

## **Study Guide**

The 1996 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America addressed several overtures about the question of salvation through Christ alone by directing the Commission on Theology to study the issue of the Christian witness to the uniqueness of Christ among people of other faiths. That commission brought a paper to the General Synod of 1999, which the synod sent back for revisions. The revised paper, known as “The Crucified One Is Lord: Confessing the Uniqueness of Christ in a Pluralist Society,” was approved by the 2000 General Synod for distribution and study across the denomination. That synod also asked the Commission on Theology to prepare a study guide for the paper, which you are reading right now.

This study guide will be most helpful in small group settings, in which each participant has a copy of this booklet.

The purpose of this study guide is to summarize the points of the original paper, bring clarification where there may have been misunderstanding, engage participants more fully in the paper’s foundational Scripture texts, and help participants to find ways to be a witness for Christ in our pluralistic society.

# **Lesson 1**

## **INTRODUCTION—PAGE 5**

1. “The Crucified One Is Lord” originated as part of the church’s response to theological issues in 1996. Although the church has since moved beyond the theological context of that time, we cannot avoid the fact that the context of our own life experiences shapes the way we approach theological issues. How have your own life experiences shaped the way you approach the issues in this paper? Have you witnessed to a person of another faith? Did your experience prompt you to re-visit the Scriptures for answers?
2. The aim of the original paper and this study guide is to better equip the church in its witness to people of other faiths. What do you need to know and experience to be better equipped for witness?

## **WHAT DO WE BELIEVE ABOUT JESUS CHRIST?—PAGES 5-6**

3. To be a Christian is to confess that Jesus is Lord. As pointed out in the first paragraph of page 5, this was the church’s earliest confession. Why did the first Christians focus on “Jesus is Lord” even more than on “Jesus is the Savior” or “Jesus is the Healer”? This paragraph cites Romans 10:9, Philippians 2:11, 1 Corinthians 12:3, and 2 Corinthians 4:5 as examples of the confession that Jesus is Lord. What do the contexts of these verses suggest about the meaning of Jesus’ lordship?
4. To say, “Jesus is Lord” ultimately means that Jesus is not only fully human, but also fully God (first paragraph of page 5). Those who adhere to polytheism (the belief in many gods; e.g., Hinduism) will hear this confession of Jesus’ deity differently than those who adhere to monotheism (the belief in one god; e.g., Islam). How can we confess the deity of Jesus clearly to polytheists? How can we confess his deity sensitively to monotheists? Since the apostles preached to a monotheistic culture (Israel) and a polytheistic culture (the Roman empire), what clues did they give us in the New Testament for making our own confession before the adherents of other faiths?

5. Jesus is not only the Lord, but also Lord of lords. Every other lord and authority is subject to his lordship (second paragraph of page 5). Philippians 2:9-10 declares that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Because Jesus is Lord of lords, Christians know that no human power can claim absolute authority. Christians can be loyal citizens, but they cannot give complete allegiance to anyone or anything but Jesus. This is precisely why totalitarian governments have persecuted Christians. These governments cannot tolerate citizens who acknowledge a higher authority than themselves. How does the lordship of Jesus affect your own political activity? How should his lordship affect your political activity?
6. To say "Jesus is Lord" is not only to confess the truth, but also to express a commitment to that truth (third paragraph of page 5). To confess "Jesus is Lord" means that Jesus is my Lord, our Lord. We undermine our witness if we formulate a perfect doctrine of Jesus' lordship but fail to obey him as Lord. As Jesus himself said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). What forms of disobedience in your church or your life are undermining your witness to the lordship of Jesus?
7. The confession of Jesus' lordship is not made because a higher power forced us into that confession. Rather, we confess Jesus' lordship because he has worked in a saving way in our lives (last paragraph of page 5, first paragraph of page 6). He is worthy of being acclaimed the Lord because he laid down his life for us all. Therefore, by the Spirit's power, we joyfully surrender to this Lord who gave himself up for us. It would be most appropriate to conclude this lesson with a doxology instead of a debate. What makes you grateful that Jesus is Lord?

## **Lesson 2**

### **HOW DO WE INTERPRET AND LIVE OUT THESE BELIEFS IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD?**

#### **INTRODUCTION—PAGE 6**

1. Although Christians easily confess Jesus' lordship as their personal belief, it's more difficult in the public square. How many other faiths are represented in your "public square"—your community or school district? What social contacts do you have with people of other faiths, and how have these had an impact upon your life?
2. This paper assumes that there is a certain level of discomfort in confessing that Jesus is Lord in the United States and Canada today. Our decreasing number of congregations and reluctance to engage in personal evangelism seems to bear out that assumption. What reasons do we give for not being active in confessing publicly that Jesus is Lord? In what ways, if any, have you and/or your church confessed your faith in the public square?
3. Christians already agree that Jesus is the one Lord, but we need to further explore how we confess his lordship. We want to confess Jesus' lordship with new conviction, sensitivity, and clarity. Which of those three elements (conviction, sensitivity, and clarity) do you think is most absent in your own life? Which of the three is most absent from your local church or our denomination?

#### **FEARS ABOUT THE USE AND ABUSE OF AUTHORITY—PAGES 7-9**

4. One issue to which we must be sensitive is our culture's distrust of the language of authority, such as the word "lord." People who have suffered at the hands of those who abused power (in the home, workplace, public square, or church) would rather not hear about Jesus being Lord (second paragraph of page 7). Have you or people you know been hurt by people who abuse power structures? How has the church been guilty of using language about power to condone oppression?
5. Even though people misuse language about power to

oppress others, those who believe the Scriptures cannot avoid such language. These words, however, gain new meaning in the light of the gospel, for Jesus is the radical embodiment of servant-lordship. His lordship does not legitimize other authority structures, but rather critiques them (third paragraph of page 7). In fact, Jesus presents a servant model of lordship. He is the Lord who gives his own life instead of taking the lives of others. Oppressive governments, abusive spouses, and tyrannical pastors will find no comfort in Jesus' model of lordship. True authority only comes through service, not domination. Jesus himself uses power to give life, not take it (first two paragraphs of page 8). These words, of course, will ring hollow to the world if we are not living them out. What roles of authority do you have in your family, church, workplace, community, or nation? How do the words of Matthew 23:11-12 and Luke 22:25-27 affect the way you use your authority? Can non-Christians tell that you wield authority differently than others do?

6. The third full paragraph of page 8 points out that in order to confess Jesus as the one way to salvation, we must follow Jesus on the same path of suffering and death that he traveled. If we confess Jesus in a boastful, authoritarian, in-your-face style, then we are not walking on the same path that Jesus himself did. How did Jesus practice evangelism? Compare and contrast a "lordly" model of evangelism with a "servant" model of evangelism. How might they differ in terms of getting to know people, tone of voice, gospel content, humility, use of power and privilege, winning arguments, dealing with dissent, being vulnerable, et cetera?
7. Although Jesus has transposed the meaning of lordship into grace, the elements of confrontation and judgment are still inherent aspects of lordship (fourth paragraph of page 8). But judgment is always in the service of grace. Does this paper strike the right balance between judgment and grace? How do the biblical references to hell (such as Matthew 25:41-43; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9; or Revelation 20:13-14) mesh with the dominant note of grace?
8. Brainstorm one way that your group or church could engage in servant evangelism in the next month, and close the session with prayer.

# **Lesson 3**

## **THE CHALLENGE OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN A POST-CHRISTIAN CONTEXT—PAGES 9-12**

1. One of the challenges of confessing Jesus as the only Lord is the prevailing opinion of our culture that no one has a monopoly on truth (last two paragraphs of page 9). It's not uncommon to hear people say, "That may be true for you, but that is not true for me," or, "Everyone has a right to his or her own opinion!" Are statements like these necessary in a democracy in order for everyone to get along?
2. The paper notes that today's religious pluralism is not completely new. In fact, our situation is similar to that of the Roman Empire in the first century. The Empire was inclusive of nearly every religion, except those religions like Christianity, which made exclusive claims (first paragraph of page 10). Often individuals, institutions, and governments that pride themselves on being inclusive lash out against religions that make exclusive claims. How tolerant are the governments of the United States and Canada? Would our government be tolerant if we withheld tax money because we believe it is being put to immoral use (such as funding weaponry or abortion)? How tolerant would our government be if we resisted its demands for our children or our land? Even if we are very gracious in the way we present the exclusive claims of Jesus, will we, as Christians, still be accused of intolerance?
3. In the next few paragraphs, the paper offers historical explanations of why our culture has become religiously pluralistic. First, religious wars following the Reformation caused skepticism about religion using political power to advance its causes (second paragraph of page 10). History shows how churches have failed in both abusing power and refusing power. How important is knowing our history in relation to witnessing effectively in the world today?
4. Secondly, the rationalism of the Enlightenment led many people to make a sharp division between the objective truths proved by reason and the subjective truths of religion (third paragraph of page 10). When Christians are quick to say that being a Christian means having a person-

al relationship with Christ, but are reluctant to make a connection between trusting Jesus and public issues (like caring for the environment), have they become one more example of how we have turned Christianity into subjective truth?

5. Cultural changes also have affected the role of the church: no longer is it a dominant social force that can impose its standards on society. Christianity is becoming a minority faith with little respect or status (last paragraph of page 11). How did early Christians maintain their faith in Jesus as the one way while living in a pluralistic society? What can we learn from Christians who have lived as religious minorities in their cultures? Is it good for the church to have clout in a society, or do we bear better witness when there is a level playing field for all the religions of a society? How should we respond when zoning boards try to keep churches out of housing developments? When city councils try to ban churches from ringing their bells and disturbing the peace? When churches lose their tax-exempt status because they stand up for their beliefs on specific political issues and candidates?

### **PUBLIC WITNESS IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD—PAGES 12-13**

6. Some Christians believe that the best way to bear witness in our culture is by working to regain political power and reassert our nation's Christian identity (second paragraph of page 12). The paper does not seem to put much stock in this approach. Does this mean Christians should abandon the corridors of power? Is there a way for Christians to bear witness through politics without imposing their beliefs on others?
7. Instead of mourning our minority status in a religiously pluralistic society, Christians in North America would do well to look for new opportunities. Maybe it will be good for us to compete in an open marketplace of religious ideas; it may force us to actually live out our faith instead of relying on prestige and money to influence our society (third paragraph of page 12). Individual lives transformed by Jesus may have a greater impact than mass evangelistic meetings (second and third paragraphs of page 13). In



today's society, churches must not only teach solid doctrine, but also train their members to live out their faith. What is more likely to cause your church to grow: good publicity in the community or changed lives among the members? What does your church do to train its members to live out their faith? What can we learn from Christians in non-Western cultures about bearing witness through politics?

8. Conclude by praying together. Praise God for the truth that never fails, confess to God the sins that have undermined our witness to God's truth, ask God to bring relief to all who are persecuted for their faith, Christian or otherwise.

## **Lesson 4**

### **HOW ARE WE TO UNDERSTAND THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST FOR ADHERENTS OF OTHER RELIGIONS?—INTRODUCTION—PAGES 13-15**

1. This section addresses the issue of whether adherents of other religions can also be saved without coming to Christ. Why is this issue so important? Should it be our goal to say, “It’s not my business to judge who is saved, but it is my business to bear witness to Jesus”?
2. The idea that all religions lead to the same destiny is incompatible with the Christian faith. An often-used metaphor of pluralism says that we may be on different paths, but we are all making our way up the same mountain, and someday at the top of the mountain we’ll see that we were all pursuing the same goal. The gospel, however, is not about us climbing up to God, but God descending into our world through Christ. Christianity is not about our search for God, but God’s search for us. As revealed on Good Friday, we are not seekers, but sinners. God is the seeker (three full paragraphs of page 15). Instead of many paths up the mountain, there are actually no paths leading upward. The only path on the mountain goes from God down to us. The next time you hear someone say that we’re all climbing up the same mountain, what will you say? How do you think they would respond to the answer of this paper? Which biblical stories especially highlight the truth that God is seeking us out?

### **CAN CHRISTIANS LEARN FROM OTHER RELIGIONS?—PAGES 15-19**

3. Because our salvation is due to God’s finding us, rather than us finding God, “Christian faith manifests a distinctive combination of confidence and humility,” states the paper. Our confidence comes from knowing that God is faithful. Our humility comes from understanding that we are often unfaithful, which we acknowledge regularly when confessing our sins (first paragraph of page 16). This paper attempts to walk the line between confidence in God’s truth and humility concerning our own understand-

ing of God's truth. Which is more difficult for you: being confident in God's truth or being humble about your own understanding of that truth?

4. Christians are called to witness with confidence because the adherents of other religions need to hear and believe the gospel in order to find hope in God (second paragraph of page 16). Isaiah 44:6-20 describes how the idolatrous activities of other religions draw their adherents away from God. How would an adherent of another religion respond to Isaiah 44? If you live as a Christian missionary in a culture filled with idolatrous images, how should you respond? Does the charge of idolatry also apply to those faiths that reject images even more strenuously than Christians do?
5. Though Christians are confident that the world needs Jesus, Christians are also called to be humble enough to recognize God's truth even in the distorted teachings of other religions (first full paragraph of page 17). The adherents of other religions learned this truth through God's self-revelation in creation (as noted in Romans 1 and the Belgic Confession), but this knowledge, distorted by human sin, is not sufficient to save anyone. What does Romans 1:18-20 tell us about God's revelation through creation? What is the purpose of this revelation? If the fullness of truth has already been revealed in Jesus, how is it helpful to our Christian witness to keep looking for kernels of truth in the other religions? Should we take an interest in other faiths?
6. The second paragraph of page 17 provides some biblical examples of truth coming through other religions. Paul quotes from poets when preaching in Athens. Melchizedek brings God's truth to Abraham, and Jethro brings it to Moses. God used a Persian emperor to rescue Israel and help the people rebuild their temple. What do you think of these examples?
7. Christians have often borrowed from pagan practices to establish a point of contact in evangelizing various cultures (third paragraph of page 17). This puts us in the interesting position of being both learners and teachers (last paragraph of page 17). We learn from other religions, but we also teach the gospel truths to the adherents of those religions. If we're just teachers, we become overbearing. If we're just

learners, we have nothing to offer. A faithful witness learns the art of mastering both. Are you a better learner or teacher? What do teachers learn from their students? What do witnesses learn from those to whom they witness? What have our missionaries learned from the people to whom they bear witness? If you were discussing religion with an adherent of another faith, what would happen if, before turning to points of disagreement, you first focused on points of agreement?

8. The paper highlights three ways that Christians can learn from the adherents of other religions. First, we can learn from their example about how to better live out our own faith (second paragraph of page 18). Anyone who has ever said, “Those Jehovah’s Witnesses put us to shame by their zeal to witness,” is learning in this way. In his book, *How Rich the Harvest*, Samuel Zwemer, RCA pioneer missionary to Muslims, wrote, “The religions of the world today—Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism—cannot be put on a dissecting table with impunity. Many who profess these faiths are so sincere and devoted that they put lukewarm Christians to shame. They know their sacred books better than we do ours. Proportionately, they give more to sustain temples and mosques and shrines than Christians give to Christ. Therefore, it is evident that we must study the non-Christian faiths with sympathy and intelligence. God has not left Himself without witness in nature, in conscience, and in the very groping of the soul for light.” How do you respond to that quotation? What have you learned from other faiths?
9. The second thing we can glean from other faiths, according to the paper, is fresh wisdom to help us understand the gospel by adopting techniques, rituals, and patterns of worship that give new expression to the gospel. How can this be done without diluting or distorting the gospel’s message? Can you name any worship practices that make you leery because they have roots in other religions? How can we learn from other religions without dabbling in idolatry?
10. Thirdly, we must first learn to know the adherents of other religions as people, so that we learn to care deeply about them. Do you know an adherent of another religion by name? How can you get to know him or her better as a person? Perhaps as a group you could go interview a local leader of another faith.

# **Lesson 5**

## **SALVATION AND OTHER RELIGIONS—PAGES 19-21**

1. The adherents of other religions are not only people with beliefs and practices, they are also people with destinies, and their destinies are of concern to us. We want others to experience the same eternal life we have found in Christ. So, the question is whether people can be saved apart from an explicit confession of Jesus' lordship. Before that question can be answered, we must be clear about what salvation is. First, salvation is in God's hands (third paragraph of page 19). He is the one who determines the destiny of each person. While it might be tempting to turn biblical truths into an equation whereby we can calculate which individuals will be saved and which ones will not be saved, that's the kind of judging that is best left in God's hands (last paragraph of page 19). According to the verses listed in this paragraph, what kinds of judging does the Lord forbid?
2. Secondly, salvation is more than a ticket to heaven. Anyone who says that non-Christians can be saved without Jesus is only talking about a "just make it into heaven" kind of salvation instead of the salvation that includes "repentance, the freedom of the Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, participation in the redeemed community, and the transformation toward a new and holy life" (first paragraph of page 20). What makes us want to reduce the question of "Who's saved?" to "Who's going to be in heaven?" Have we been unduly influenced by the story of the thief on the cross, so that all that matters is making it into heaven?
3. Thirdly, salvation is not just about individuals, but the restoration of the whole creation in a new heaven and a new earth (second paragraph of page 20). Paul often writes with this larger perspective in mind. He is so enraptured that he almost sounds like a Universalist. For instance, he says in 1 Corinthians 15:22, "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." Then in Colossians 1:19-20 he says concerning Jesus, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." In interpreting these verses, how can we take the word "all"

seriously and yet avoid universalism?

4. The third paragraph of page 20 emphasizes that salvation is always linked to faith in God's gift and promise of faith. Read Hebrews 11:6 and Ephesians 2:8 and ask why faith is linked so strongly with salvation.

### **SALVATION IN THE NAME OF JESUS—PAGES 21-24**

5. This section begins by reaffirming the biblical truths that Jesus is the one way of salvation and it is the church's responsibility to proclaim his name (last four paragraphs of page 21, first two paragraphs of page 22). The second paragraph of page 22 states, "There is no assurance of salvation revealed to us apart from confessing Christ and trusting in him alone." What would you say to a non-Christian who asked you point-blank, "Does God send those who don't trust in Jesus to hell?" Perhaps you could role-play this. Evaluate the following possible responses:
  - a) Yes;
  - b) Yes, but that's not God's fault, that's our fault;
  - c) Why do you want to know?
  - d) God doesn't want to answer abstract questions; he wants to know how you will respond to him;
  - e) We'll come back to that later;
  - f) The Lord doesn't want anyone to be lost;
  - g) I prefer to leave that in God's hands;
  - h) All I know is that woe to me if I don't tell others about Jesus;
  - i) We will be judged only by what we know;
  - j) Do you want to know what the Bible says, or do you want me to tell you what you want to hear?
  - k) A few really good people who don't know Jesus might make it into heaven;
  - l) No, my God wouldn't do such a thing.Would you word your answer differently if you were speaking to a faithful adherent of another religion? A teenager in Sunday school? A new Christian?
6. Even though we know the truth that Jesus is the one way to salvation, it does not mean we know the limits of God's grace. We are saved by Christ alone, and normally we come to experience that through the preaching of the Word, but that does not mean that those who preach the Word are the

dispensers or mediators of salvation (as the Roman church was teaching in the time of the Reformers). That's why the Reformed confessions and theologians affirmed that salvation is mediated only through the gospel of Christ, but at the same time they left room for the possibility that God could impart saving faith in Jesus apart from the preaching of the Word; they were honoring God's control over salvation. We may be channels through whom God brings the message of salvation, but we are not mediators of salvation (the second to last paragraph on page 23). Do you understand what the Reformers were saying in the quotations found on page 23? If God were to save someone through Christ even though that person had never heard the gospel message, would that give us reason to be optimistic about the eternal destiny of others who do not have explicit faith in Christ? Would that give us reason to avoid our responsibility to preach the Word and bear witness for Christ? How does the confession that God is in charge of salvation, and we are not, affect the way we evangelize? Does it undercut or fuel evangelism?

7. The first full paragraph of page 24 contends that even if we do not know the limits of God's grace, we still live under an urgent mandate to proclaim the gospel. How would God evaluate the following motives for evangelizing: obligation, love for God, love for "the lost," guilt, fear of judgment, obedience to God's command, gratitude for salvation, pride in winning souls, the prospect of the lost spending eternity in hell, joy in sharing good news, pity, or compassion?

## **THE ONGOING CHALLENGE—PAGES 24-25**

8. Even though Christians believe that Jesus is the only Savior of the world, we must recognize that the world is suspicious of our claims. They remember only too well the oppression, colonialism, and forced conversions of the past. The confession of Jesus as the only Savior and Lord does not allow for "self-congratulatory superiority" (last paragraph of page 24). Instead we must share Jesus with all people with a spirit of love, service, and humility. Then the world will be able to see that Jesus did not come to destroy cultures, reinforce patterns of domination, negate religious searching, or impose uniformity. Instead he came to bring eternal and abundant life. How has this paper equipped you to be a better witness for Jesus?