

ONLY ONE CHRIST?

(Third in the series: The Need for Creed)

Texts: John 1:1, 14-18; Heb. 1:1-4

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Introduction

Privilege can be fun. Many years ago I was invited to sit in the private box of the developer of the Omni arena in Atlanta. I can tell you that the Circus was a different experience from that point of view. Cotton candy, hot dogs, coke and those ridiculously priced circus toys were suddenly free and my children were picked –immediately – to be in the clown parade around the big top. I looked down upon the common folk who were looking up at us and enjoyed feeling a tiny bit superior.

Of course most of the time I am one of the common folks looking up at the private box – thinking it a shame that some people are too exclusive to sit among the great unwashed.

Exclusivity is like that. The view is nice from the inside. On the other hand if we believe we are on the outside looking in; the view is different. Who enjoys having a sense of inferiority?

More is at stake when the issue moves from arena seating to religious claims. What about the Hindu who lives next door? Conventional wisdom is that if Islam and Christianity (and other faiths) would lay down their claims to superiority, the world would be a more peaceful place. Lots of religious people want to say that when it comes to God we're all talking about the same thing. Lots of irreligious people want to say that when it comes to God we're all indulging the same fantasy. Exclusive claims are in bad taste.

So here we come to the second article of the Apostles' Creed: *I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord* – and we feel some tension. The “only-ness” of Jesus feels awkward. Maybe we should have quit with *I believe in God the Father Almighty*. Lots of folks could sign on for that. But the Apostles' Creed starts naming names. Jesus Christ is an “only” Son. What do we do with that?

- 1. We should be quick to say that confessing this part of the creed is what makes us Christians. We don't simply believe in a Unitarian creator God, easy as that might be for many people to believe. We believe that a man named Jesus uniquely reveals God – in a way so profound the creed calls him an “only” Son.**

We have a bit of a scandal on our hands. So how is Jesus “only”? How is he “exclusive” when exclusive claims in the name of religion in our time are viewed with the greatest suspicion?

The “one and only” language comes in part from John’s gospel. He says in 1:1 that *“the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* He draws tightest relationship between this *Word* and God.

In verse 14 he draws a line from this *Word* to the historical person we call Jesus:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the father full of grace and truth...No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side has made him known. (vs. 18)

There it is. The *Word* in flesh –Jesus - has an “only” relationship with God that is different than any other kind. It is incredibly close. How close? The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says:

The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being... (vs. 3).

Jesus is to God as light is to its source. Jesus is to God as coin is an exact representation of the original. The words are struggling to speak a mystery: Jesus is God. The “only-ness” of Jesus is his sharing in the divinity of God. He is like God, like no other, because he is God.

Let’s say it differently. Jesus is not related to Christianity the way Freud is related to Freudianism, or Buddha to Buddhism, or Marx to Marxism. Christianity claims that the message and the messenger are one. God intervened in the world as a man from Nazareth not simply to give a message but to be the message. And that message is in one sense very simple: *to be in relationship with me is to be in relationship with the God of the universe.*

Freud, Marx, and even the first Buddha are dead. Their ideas live on without them. But God as we have come to know him in Jesus Christ is not dead. He lives today. Yes Christianity makes an exclusive claim because Jesus himself claims that in meeting him we encounter God, not simply knowledge about God.

2. To say Jesus is “the only Son” is not to confess our arrogance but his identity. He is the relationship with God he proclaims. But his exclusive claim makes a personal reach into our lives. He is also “our Lord”.

To call Jesus Lord is again to confess his divinity – his identity with God. The word “Lord” in your English bible translates the Greek word “kurios” which was used to translate the Hebrew name for God.

But we all know that to call somebody Lord is to recognize their authority. Because of Jesus identity we confess his authority. He is our Lord: he is Lord of the church.

For Christians Jesus is the Christ – the savior chosen by God. His title “Christ” (which means messiah) says that he came to save us. We are caught up in the grip of sin. He provided, as the letter to the Hebrews says, “purification for sins.” It was his Lordship – in his life death and resurrection - over all the forces that enslave our lives that destroyed the power of sin.

The earliest creed of the Christian church was “Jesus is Lord” (Col. 1:23) which is at the same time to say “no others can be”. His claim on us is exclusive. To confess him is to say that my nation, my political party, my race, my education can no longer be my savior. My allegiance to them cannot come before my allegiance to him. It was as hard to confess in the first century as it is in the twenty-first.

“Well and good for you Christians,” some might say, “He’s *your* Lord.” But Christ didn’t leave that option. Paul’s letter to the Colossians says he came:

To reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace with his blood shed on the cross. (1:20)

Christ comes seeking the whole world. I’ll be the first to admit that there are lots of things in this world that appear to be untouched by the Lordship of Jesus Christ. There’s too much pain, death, and injustice. *But to confess the creed is to say we believe that this is where things are headed.* The one who claims the church for himself, claims the whole world for justice, healing, and mercy. And what is hidden in this age will be visible in the age to come.

Sometimes we forget the Jesus didn't die and rise to save the church. We're simply the people who are in on the secret. We're supposed to the down payment on the world's future – and in our better moments we live that way. That which is being done in the church will be done in the world. Jesus is Lord of all.

- 3. Jesus the exclusive son, the exclusive Lord, the “only” Christ. We’ve grabbed a tiger by the tale. How is this going work? What are we to do with Jesus? Heaven knows the church hasn’t always gotten it right. We’ve behaved as if we are lords. Maybe the answer is not to dumb down our confession of Jesus, but to practice his “Lordship” the way he did. As we’ve said the messenger was the message.**

I said earlier that it was no easier to call Jesus Lord in the first century than in it is in the twenty-first. The first Christians lived among incredible cultural diversity in the iron grip of the Roman Empire. They had no power, privilege, or vote. Their confession of Jesus brought them more persecution than praise.

But Apostle Paul left us a clue as to how to practice the Lordship of Christ in a suspicious and angry world. *Have this attitude among yourselves*, he writes in his letter to the Philippians. And pointing to Jesus he says:

Who, being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of servant, being made in human likeness.

Think about that. It is the nature of God to be a servant – all the way to death on a cross. The Lordship of Christ confronts the world with the power of humility. Do we have the faith to believe it?

To confess that “Christ is Lord” is to bind ourselves to express it as he did. It's to intervene in our world the way he did in his. It's to be subversive of people's expectations as to how lords behave. There's some risk. It's a hard calling. In fact it would be impossible – unless we believe that Christ's lordship which is often hidden in our time will become clear in the time to come:

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place...that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Now we worship, serve, and wait for the Lord. We trust that in God's good time our Lord will be seen for the Lord that he is.

Conclusion

We worship only one Christ because our world didn't need better information; it required personal intervention. It still does.

Next time you look at a picture from the Haitian earthquake ask yourself if an air drop of instruction books on how to dig yourself out of a collapsed building would have done much good. What was needed was an army of people equipped to dig, and skilled to heal, one life at a time.

That's how Jesus becomes our Lord - one intervention, one extraction, one healing, one life at a time – as his church takes up the shovel of his servanthood in our world. That may be an “only Lord” the world can believe in.