A 15-Year Retrospective on the Lordship Controversy

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It has now been 15 years since *The Gospel According to Jesus* was first published and the lordship of Christ became a matter of intense debate among evangelicals. That book stood for the simple proposition that the gospel is a call to surrender to the lordship of Christ in humble, repentant faith.

My publisher originally assigned *The Gospel According to Jesus*to their academic division. They had high expectations for the book from the start and initially thought it might sell as many as 30,000 copies--an unusually high number for an academic book of that sort. But it surpassed 100,000 in sales in a few months, and within a couple of years it had reached the quarter-million mark. There are now about half a million copies in circulation, and the book is still in print. That is almost unprecedented for a polemic book dealing with a theological issue.

When I wrote the book, I expected it to be somewhat controversial, of course, because I was defending a view that a handful of respected Christian leaders, (including Charles Ryrie, John Walvoord, and Zane Hodges) had already denounced as "lordship salvation." But I confess that I did not anticipate the firestorm of intense debate that arose. The controversy seemed to dominate the evangelical world for several years after the book was published.

Most of my theological opponents in the lordship debate were fellow conservative evangelicals who had been my friends and allies in earlier controversies regarding the charismatic movement and the inerrancy of the Scriptures. They were men whom I deeply respected (and still esteem highly for much of the work they have done).

But they were promoting a view of the gospel that, from a biblical perspective, seemed seriously flawed. They insisted there is no place in the gospel for the proclamation of Jesus' lordship. They said those who call unbelievers to surrender to Christ's authority are preaching a gospel of works. They taught that repentance is a false addition to the gospel message. They objected to any kind of evangelism that employed the language of denying oneself, taking up a cross, and following Christ (cf. Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). They declared that devotion to Christ, love for Him, and obedience to His commands are all matters that pertain to *discipleship* rather than saving faith. Faith, they said, is merely the acceptance of salvation as a free and unconditional gift--and they portrayed discipleship as a second-level commitment. Therefore, according to their view, the gospel presents

Jesus as Savior only, not as Lord.

Nearly all the leading advocates of the no-lordship gospel were associated with Dallas Theological Seminary. In fact, Dr. James M. Boice, who wrote powerfully in defense of "lordship salvation" long before I entered the fray, referred to their view as "the Dallas Doctrine."

The pedigree of no-lordship doctrine at Dallas Seminary is traceable back to founder Lewis Sperry Chafer. The doctrine apparently stemmed from Chafer's misguided attempts to develop a uniquely dispensationalist soteriology. Chafer (together with other early dispensationalists, including C. I. Scofield) was so zealous to eliminate every vestige of law from the dispensation of grace that he embraced a kind of antinomianism. That was the seed from which the no-lordship gospel sprouted.

Apparently, no-lordship doctrine no longer dominates Dallas Seminary the way it once did, but controversy over the issue is by no means dead. The past year or so has seen publication of a few new books touting the no-lordship view, attempting to revive the debate yet again. At least one organization, the Grace Evangelical Society, was founded in the heat of the controversy a decade and a half ago and regularly publishes a journal and a newsletter devoted to defending no-lordship theology. The question evidently remains unsettled for many.

My own views on "lordship salvation" have not changed, and if anything I now see the issue as larger and more far-reaching than I did when I first wrote *The Gospel According to Jesus*. Much more is at stake than just the question of how we proclaim the gospel. The lordship issue has serious ramifications for a number of crucial points of theology.

Grace

The doctrine of grace, for example, is profoundly affected by no-lordship teaching. Defenders of the no-lordship gospel often refer to their unique teachings as "Grace Theology" and their movement as "the Grace Movement." They are convinced that *only* their system preserves the gospel's message of grace. That is precisely why they insist every opposing opinion is a kind of works-salvation.

But they are working with an unbiblical notion of "grace." Grace is not a liberal clemency or a passive indulgence that simply tolerates and coexists with sin. Divine grace doesn't guarantee heaven in the afterlife while merely overlooking the evils of this life. Authentic grace is the undeserved favor of God toward sinners, delivering them from the *power* as well as the *penalty* of sin (Romans 6:14). Grace is dynamic, "teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:12).

Furthermore, grace is not merely God's response to the sinner's initiative. Quite the opposite. Because He is gracious, God takes the initiative, drawing the sinner (John 6:44, 65), granting

repentance (Acts 3:26; 5:31; 11:18), and awakening the heart to faith (Acts 13:48; 16:14). Every aspect of the believer's response--conviction, repentance, and faith--is the result of God's gracious work in the heart. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

God's grace is rooted in Christ's atonement for sin, which was infinitely costly. In fact, Christ's death on behalf of sinners is the supreme expression of divine grace. It is unthinkable that God would sacrifice His Son to purchase heaven for sinners but leave them to fend for themselves against the power of sin in this life (cf. Romans 8:32).

Sanctification

That's why sanctification is another major doctrine whose biblical foundations are undermined by no-lordship doctrine. The whole gist of the no-lordship message is that while justification is a free gift of God's grace, sanctification is primarily the believer's own work--and therefore more or less optional.

But Scripture teaches that sanctification begins at conversion. The process of practical sanctification is launched by God's regenerating work, when He graciously gives the sinner a new heart and a new spirit of obedience (Ezekiel 11:19-20; 36:26-27; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Just as regeneration marks the beginning of sanctification, glorification marks its end. Sanctification culminates in that moment when we see Christ and are instantly conformed perfectly to His image (1 John 3:2; 1 Corinthians 13:12). Meanwhile, *all* genuine believers are being sanctified--conformed gradually to the image of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Romans 8:29). Those who remain unchanged and in unbroken bondage to sin have no true knowledge of Christ (1 John 3:6).

Sanctification is as much a work of divine grace as justification. By portraying sanctification as an optional human work, advocates of no-lordship doctrine actually fall into the very error of works-salvation they profess to deplore. They have made at least this aspect of salvation into a human work.

Justification by Faith

The pivotal doctrine in the lordship debate is justification by grace through faith alone (*sola fide*). No-lordship doctrine is a corruption of *sola fide*. The leading proponents of the no-lordship view err because they tend to make justification practically the only work God does in salvation, and they omit or downplay the doctrines of regeneration and sanctification.

Justification is a forensic decree--God's legal verdict that the sinner has been fully forgiven and credited with the full merit of a perfect righteousness. Justification must be distinguished from regeneration and sanctification, but it can never be divorced from them. There is no such thing as a

justified sinner who is still unregenerate or utterly unsanctified.

That is not to suggest that we are justified because of our sanctification. We are not even justified "because" of our faith. Faith is the *instrument* of our justification, not the *ground* of it.

The righteousness of Christ--not any work done by the believer or wrought by God in the sinner--is the true ground of our justification. In other words, God gives us a righteous standing only because of the perfect righteousness He imputes to us. We're not justified because of any righteousness we attain in our sanctification. We're not justified because of the quality of our faith or the depth of our repentance. God accepts us only for Christ's sake. Because of our union with Christ, he receives us as righteous *in Christ*. Thus we are justified because of what Christ has done on our behalf; not because of anything we do, period.

And it is by faith alone that we lay hold of the promise of justification. That's what Scripture means when it speaks of being "justified by faith" (Romans 3:8; 5:1; Galatians 2:16; 3:24).

But, as the Reformers said, while faith alone justifies, the faith that justifies is never alone. Genuine faith inevitably produces good works. The works are the fruit, not the root, of faith. And justification is therefore complete at the very inception of faith, before faith ever produces a single work. It is not a process like sanctification.

Most who have defended the lordship of Christ for the past decade and a half have labored diligently to make these things clear and to defend the principle of *sola fide*. This will become more and more important if the debate is rekindled, because there are a number of theological trends on the horizon that tend to undermine the principle of *sola fide*. These include the so-called "New Perspective on Paul," several recent attacks on the doctrine of imputation, ECT-style ecumenism, and a revival of Anabaptist opposition to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Some who have helped popularize these trends claim that they too are simply battling the shallow "faith" and cheap "grace" of modern evangelicalism, but they actually overthrow the heart of the gospel when they abandon the doctrine of justification by faith.

The errors of no-lordship theology do not find their origin in the principle of *sola fide*; they stem from an incomplete, man-centered soteriology that refuses to see anything *beyond* justification. In defending the gospel from no-lordship doctrine, we must take care not to commit the opposite error by downplaying or abandoning the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

The Sovereignty of God

Another doctrine under attack in the lordship debate is the doctrine of God's sovereignty. No-lordship theology cannot coexist with biblical views of election, predestination, and divine foreknowledge.

Simply put, you won't find a Calvinist who believes in no-lordship doctrine.

If salvation is really all God's work, how could it be utterly lacking the grace of sanctification? Is surrender to Christ really a human work, or is regeneration with all its effects a sovereign work of God? How can a believer whose heart has been renewed by divine grace fail to bow to Christ's lordship? As I wrote in chapter 1 of *The Gospel According to Jesus*:

We must remember above all that salvation is a sovereign work of God. Biblically it is defined by what it produces, not by what one does to get it. Works are not necessary to earn salvation. But true salvation wrought by God will not fail to produce the good works that are its fruit (cf. Matthew 7:17). No aspect of salvation is merited by human works, but it is all the work of God (Titus 3:5-7). Thus salvation cannot be defective in any dimension. "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). As a part of His saving work, God will produce repentance, faith, sanctification, yieldedness, obedience, and ultimately glorification. Since He is not dependent on human effort in producing those elements, an experience that lacks any of them cannot be the saving work of God.

I once listened to a message by S. Lewis Johnson critiquing a book by Zane Hodges in which Dr. Johnson concluded that the central error underlying no-lordship doctrine is nothing but the ancient heresy of semi-pelagianism--the belief that saving grace cannot be efficacious without the prior cooperation of human free will.

Dr. Johnson's analysis was accurate. Scripture teaches that God's saving grace is inherently efficacious. All whom the Father has chosen *shall* come to Christ (John 6:37). Each one of them will be effectually called, justified, glorified, and perfectly conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29-30). No aspect of salvation can fail, because none of it hinges on the fickle human will. All of it is the efficacious work of a sovereign God. Accept those truths and you cannot embrace no-lordship doctrine.

Other Important Points of Doctrine

Where you land on the lordship question will also have far-reaching implications for your views on assurance, faith, repentance, eternal rewards, human depravity, the role of the moral law, and a host of other crucial doctrines. Almost no aspect of soteriology is left untainted by the errors of no-lordship doctrine.

So this is still a vital issue and one pastors can ill afford to ignore. If you are the least bit undecided about where you stand in the lordship debate, you need to study the issue carefully and come to solid biblical conclusions about it. Here are some books we recommend, beyond *The Gospel According to*

Jesus(Zondervan, 1988) and *The Gospel According to the Apostles*(Word, 1993):

- Belcher, Richard P. *A Layman's Guide to the Lordship Controversy*. Southbridge, MA: Crowne, 1990.
- Boice, James M. *Christ's Call to Discipleship*. Chicago: Moody, 1986.
- Chantry, Walter. *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1970.
- Chrisope, T. Alan. *Jesus Is Lord*. Welwyn, Hertfordshire: Evangelical Press, 1982.
- Crenshaw, Curtis I. *Lordship Salvation: The Only Kind There Is!* Memphis: Footstool, 1994.
- Gentry, Kenneth L. *Lord of the Saved: Getting to the Heart of the Lordship Debate*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992.
- Hoekema, Anthony A. *Saved by Grace*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.
- Kuiper, R. B. *God Centered Evangelism*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1961.
- Lescelius, Robert. *Lordship Salvation: Some Crucial Questions and Answers*. Asheville, NC: Revival Literature, 1992.
- Reisinger, Ernest C. *Lord & Christ*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994.
- _____. *Today's Evangelism: It's Message and Methods.* Phillipsburg, NJ: Craig, 1982.
- Tozer, A. W. *I Call It Heresy!* Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1974.

Please note that our recommendation of these books does not necessarily constitute an endorsement of everything by all of these authors.

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