

# OUR SOVEREIGN GOD

Knowing and Serving  
the Lord of All

Edited by James Montgomery Boice



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 1977 by Baker Book House with the title *Our Sovereign God: Addresses from the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology, 1974–1976*  
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Previously issued 2008 by Solid Ground Christian Books  
Reissued 2023 by P&R Publishing

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ISBN: 978-1-62995-862-0 (pbk)  
ISBN: 978-1-62995-949-8 (ePub)

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

To him  
who sitteth upon the throne,  
and unto the Lamb



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# Editor's Preface

IT IS appropriate that the first book to appear as a result of the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology should bear the title *Our Sovereign God*. The sovereignty of God has been an emphasis of the conference from the beginning, and it is a most vital theme.

The conference has three announced objectives. The first objective is “to awaken a new interest in biblical theology and to give greater visibility to the doctrines of grace through the church generally.” Those involved in the planning and execution of the conference believe that there is a spiritual awakening in our time. However, that awakening is biblically and doctrinally shallow and comes at a time when the churches, for the most part, are ill-equipped to provide the necessary depth.

The second objective is “to establish a forum at which men and women in the Reformed tradition (from all denominations) might meet and be encouraged by others of like mind.” This objective is linked to the first, for spiritual awakening is never simply a private affair, still less is it ever the work of a single individual.

Here the Puritans are a superb example. What made these men effective under God in so completely transforming both England and Scotland? There were many factors, of course. For one thing, these men were scholars, a fact which is often forgotten. They were steeped in the Word of God. They were diligent. No work was too great or mountain too high for them to tackle.

They were pious men who spent long hours in study and on their knees. They were not looking for promotions to positions of greater and greater prominence. Rather, they were willing to stay in one place, so the work of bringing the Word fully to that place might be completed. In addition, it must also be said that the Puritans knew one another, prayed for one another, assisted one another, loved one another. That is, they worked together in the great task of confronting their age with the gospel. Something of this spirit has also gripped many of those who have been attending the Philadelphia Conference annually.

The third objective of the conference is "to marshal resources to the end that believers might propagate the faith more effectively and thus 'establish, strengthen, and settle' the church upon the firm foundation of the doctrines of the apostles." The conference staff is anxious to see this objective realized. They pray that in the last quarter of the twentieth century the doctrines of God's sovereignty and grace might be sounded forth with new vigor, and that the God of grace might work through them to bring forth blessing and revival.

From the secular perspective, these are not at all great days. At the time of the first conference in Philadelphia in 1974, a religion reporter for one of the large daily newspapers called to ask about the conference. "Why should your conference amount to anything?" he asked. "People are disillusioned today, and many are apathetic. Many will not even know what the title of your conference or the phrase 'Reformed theology' means. Why should this venture be successful?" It was a fair question, but there was a good answer. First, many people are looking for answers in new places precisely *because* they are disillusioned. The rebirth of interest in the eastern religions is one symptom of their inner hunger. The Jesus movement is another. There is a striking interest in religious questions among young people, many of whom have since thronged the various conference meetings.



## EDITOR'S PREFACE

Second, because the doctrines of the Reformed faith are true, they have a unique ability to capture and enthrall the minds of men. When they are acknowledged to be true, they illuminate the mind and transform the individual perceiving them.

Finally, there is an undeniable connection between these doctrines and the periods of greatest advance for Christianity in the western world. Wherever one turns in church history, it is evident that the doctrines of grace have spawned religious awakenings. By the power of the Spirit of God, those doctrines have given birth to every spiritual renewal—from the sixteenth-century Reformation in Europe to the seventeenth-century revivals in England and Scotland to the eighteenth-century awakenings in England and America to the nineteenth-century recovery of true religion and godliness in England under Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Knox, Baxter, Bunyan, Henry, Edwards, Whitefield, and Spurgeon (not to mention the host of confessors and martyrs who preceded them in church history) were all Calvinists. It was the fearless proclamation of the whole counsels of God, including the distinct doctrines of the Reformed faith, which God used to turn millions to Christ in those centuries.

Why should not the same be true in our day? May God use this volume, the conference of which it is a product, and other similar ventures as one part of a widespread spiritual renewal and revival so desperately needed in our time.

James Montgomery Boice



# 1

## The Sovereignty of God the Son

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JOHN R. W. STOTT

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I IMAGINE that most of us are aware that the words “Jesus is Lord” constituted the very earliest Christian creed. If anybody in the early days confessed that Jesus Christ is Lord, he or she was accepted for baptism as a Christian believer. For it was recognized, on the one hand, that nobody can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3), and, on the other hand, that if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Rom. 10:9). In Greek the confession “Jesus is Lord” is only two words (*kurios Iesous*). It seems extraordinary that just two words could be a sufficient basis for the acceptance of a man or woman as a candidate for baptism. The reason is that these two words are pregnant with meaning. They signify both a theological conviction about Jesus Christ and a personal commitment to him.

## What Does It Mean?

To say Jesus is Lord implies at least two things: (1) that Jesus is God and (2) that Jesus is Savior. In the Greek version of the Old Testament, the word *kurios* is used to translate the Hebrew word *Yahweh* or *Jehovah*. That is why in our English Bibles *Jehovah* is not translated as *Jehovah*. Instead, we have the word *LORD*. The writers of the New Testament knew that in the Old Testament *kurios* referred to God. But knowing this they did not hesitate to transfer the title to Jesus. That is tantamount to saying that Jesus is Jehovah.

They went further than that. They not only transferred to Jesus the title of God from the Old Testament. They also reapplied to Jesus verses in the Old Testament that alluded to Jehovah. One example is Isaiah 45:23. God himself is speaking, and he says, "I have sworn by myself . . . that unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear." Finding this in Isaiah, the apostle Paul with great audacity given him by the Holy Spirit transfers it to Jesus. Thus, he says in Philippians 2:9–11 that God has exalted Jesus and "given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." So the New Testament authors did not hesitate to transfer to Jesus the title that was given to Jehovah and verses that applied to Jehovah in the Old Testament.

Not only so, but the New Testament authors did not feel a need to argue that Jesus is Jehovah. They argued justification by faith because it was being challenged in the church. But you do not find them arguing the deity of Jesus. Within a few years of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the assertion that Jesus Christ is Lord was already the universal faith of the Christian church. He is God, and he deserves worship. Jesus shares in the absolute supremacy of the Father and is worthy of the honor that is due to God alone.

To say Jesus is Lord also means that Jesus is Savior. It has been customary in some evangelical circles to distinguish rather sharply between Jesus the Savior and Jesus the Lord. It has been suggested that it is possible and even respectable to trust in Jesus as your Savior, yet not surrender to him as Lord. Such teaching is biblically indefensible. For not only is Jesus our Lord and Savior—he is the Lord Jesus Christ, the one and indivisible Christ—but his lordship implies his salvation and actually announces it.

So it is impossible to affirm Jesus as Lord without thereby affirming that Jesus is Savior. The title *Lord* is a symbol of Christ's victory over the forces of evil. If Jesus has been exalted over all the principalities and powers of evil, as indeed he has, this is the reason why he has been called Lord. If Jesus has been proclaimed Lord, as he has, it is because these powers are under his feet. He has conquered them on the cross, and therefore our salvation—that is to say, our rescue from sin, Satan, fear, and death—is due to that victory.

How then can we listen to the false accusations of our conscience if Satan, the slanderer, has been dethroned and disarmed by the Lord? If Jesus has conquered this slanderer, why do we listen to the false accusations of conscience? Of course, our conscience sometimes truly accuses us—I am not writing of that—but Satan often tries to get our consciences to accuse us falsely. Why listen if Jesus as the Lord has conquered him? Why do we remain in the bondage of evil if Jesus the Lord has broken its power?

Why should we be paralyzed by fear? Many Christians are paralyzed by fear: fear of the unknown, the occult, circumstances, people, demons, the number 13. How can we be paralyzed by fear if the very things of which we are afraid are under the feet of Jesus? Jesus is Lord. What are we afraid of? It is under his feet. How can we dread death? How can we think of

death as anything but a trivial episode, a transit lounge between life here and life in its fullness, if Jesus the Lord has destroyed death and him who has the power of death, that is, the devil? It is because of the supreme lordship of Jesus over sin and death that we ourselves can be saved from death.

The apostle Peter understood this very well. So in the first Christian sermon, preached on the Day of Pentecost, Peter said, “You killed Jesus, but God has exalted him and has set him at his own right hand, and at that supreme place of honor and executive authority Jesus has received the Spirit from the Father and has shed forth this that you now see and hear” (see Acts 2:23, 33). In other words, Jesus has the authority to bestow on his church salvation, the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Spirit because he is Lord. Our salvation, our receiving of salvation, and our receiving of the gift of the Spirit are due to the fact that he is at the right hand of God. It is from that position that he saves us. That there is no salvation without lordship is the doctrine of the New Testament. Indeed, the two great affirmations “Jesus is Lord” and “Jesus saves” are virtually synonymous.

## **An Everlasting Title**

Jesus is Lord. But where did he get that title? How did he come to win it for himself? There are three stages.

First, Jesus has possessed the title eternally because he is eternally God. For example, in 1 Corinthians 8:5–6 we read that, although there are many so-called gods and lords in the world today, yet for us Christians there is one God the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. The creed affirms that the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, and the Spirit is Lord; yet there are not three Lords, but one. So the Father,

Son, and Holy Spirit together share in this eternal lordship that belongs to the persons of the Trinity as God. There has never been a time when Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, was not Lord.

Second, Jesus brought the title with him when he came to earth. When he became man, he did not cease to be God. When he became a servant, he did not cease to be the Lord. Have you ever thought how wonderful the angelic announcement of his nativity to the shepherds was? It was not, “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is the Lord’s Christ.” That was not the announcement. Rather, by a subtle change from the genitive to the nominative it was “a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). That is, he is himself the Lord; he is not merely the Lord’s Anointed but the Anointed who *is* the Lord. He brought that title with him when he came to earth so that the unheard-of happened—the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes was declared by the angel to be our God and Savior.

During his public ministry, Jesus gave good evidence of his self-consciousness. He knew himself to be the Lord. He announced, for example, that with his coming into the world the kingdom of God had arrived. God’s kingly rule had come. People could now receive and inherit it by being related to him. Moreover, in the upper room Jesus said to the apostles gathered around him, “You call me Master and Lord: and you say well; for so I am” (John 13:13). It is noteworthy that he said that just after he had gotten on his hands and knees to wash his disciples’ feet. Just after he had visibly become their servant, he publicly proclaimed himself to be their Lord. Their Lord became their servant, and it is this combination of lordship and servitude that constitutes that paradox that is still the greatest evidence of the deity of Jesus. This is what we imply when we say that Jesus is Lord.

There is a third way in which Jesus has been given the title *Lord*. He was specifically accorded that title at his exaltation

to the right hand of God. Jesus never predicted his sufferings without going on to predict his exaltation. He said that the Son of Man would be killed, but he added that on the third day he would rise again. The Son of Man must suffer but through his sufferings enter into glory. Jesus even dared to apply to himself the verse that reads: “The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit you at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool” (Ps. 110:1). Before the high priest, Jesus said, “You shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of [God]” (Mark 14:62).

So Jesus is Lord three times over: first, by right of his Godhead, sharing the throne of God; second, by right of his historical ministry, ushering in the kingdom of God; and third, by right of his supreme exaltation, sitting at the right hand of God. Jesus is three times Lord and thus deserves our full homage and our worship.

## **Practical Implications**

This brings us to the crux of this chapter: the implications of Jesus’s title. The Bible is not interested in doctrine without practice. Truth in Holy Scripture is always something not only to be known but to be acted upon. So the question before us is not only “Do we understand the doctrine that Jesus Christ is Lord?” but “What are the practical implications of that for us in our lives?” I want to suggest six major implications.

### **An Intellectual Implication**

Jesus is Lord of our minds. I begin with our minds because the mind is the inner citadel that controls our actions. As we think, so we are.

I remind you of that beautiful invitation in which Jesus said, “Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden,



and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and you shall find rest unto your souls” (Matt. 11:28–29). Christ’s original hearers would have had no difficulty in understanding what he meant, because in those days everybody spoke of the yoke of Torah, the yoke of the Law of Moses. They regarded the Torah as a divine yoke that had been laid upon them by God himself. But knowing that, Jesus boldly set up his own teaching (in which he both endorsed the Law of Moses and transcended it) as a new yoke to which his disciples must submit.

Later he commissioned them to pass on to their converts everything that he had commanded them. Similarly, the apostle Paul writes of “casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). This is absolutely fundamental to biblical Christianity, because no man or woman is truly converted who is not intellectually converted. And nobody can claim to be intellectually converted who has not brought his or her mind into submission to the authority of Jesus as Lord.

Jesus is our teacher about God, man, duty, destiny, life, death, righteousness, Scripture, tradition—you name it. Jesus is our authority in each area, and the Christian is not at liberty to disagree with him. To disagree with Jesus, as Paul writes, is proud and arrogant (1 Tim. 6:4), and it is insubordinate (Titus 1:10–11). A false teacher, who disagrees with the teaching of Christ, is like an insubordinate adolescent. We must not be ashamed to say so in the church today. In the contemporary situation, where the wildest things are being taught by church leaders in the name of Jesus, it is urgent to recall the whole church to that humble position that properly belongs to it. It is to be under the teaching yoke of the Lord.

### **An Ethical Implication**

Jesus is the Lord of our wills and of our moral standards. It is not only *what we believe* that is to come under the lordship of Jesus but also *how we behave*. Discipleship implies obedience, and obedience implies that there are absolute moral commands that we are required to obey. To refer to Jesus politely as “our Lord” is not enough. He still says to us, “Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46). In today’s miasma of relativity, we need to maintain unashamedly the absolute moral standards of the Lord. Further, we need to go on and teach that the yoke of Jesus is easy and his burden is light, and that under the yoke of Jesus we have not bondage but freedom and rest.

### **A Vocational Implication**

Jesus is Lord of our careers, professions, jobs, ambitions, and futures. If Jesus is Lord, and we are his servants, we are called not only to think Christ’s thoughts and obey his commands but to follow his example of ministry.

I do not hesitate to say that every Christian is called to ministry. I do not say that every Christian is called to *the* ministry, by which is meant the pastoral ministry, but every Christian without any exception whatsoever is called to give his or her life in service. The Greek word for ministry (*diakonia*) means service, and there are many kinds of service. Many may be perplexed about their life’s work, not knowing how to discover what it should be. They can certainly begin with this fixed point. All Christians are called to ministry. All Christians are called to give their lives in service. For if Jesus is a servant and we are called to follow him, then we must give our lives in service also. The only difference between us is the precise nature which that service will take. It might be as a pastor; it might be as a missionary; it might be in one of the great professions like law, medicine,

education, or the social services; it might be in one of what we sometimes call the more secular spheres—in politics, the mass media, business, or industry; it might be as a wife, mother, and homemaker. There are many forms of Christian ministry, but whatever form it takes, it is ministry, and in it we will be stretched in the service of God and man. Everything we have and are by the creation and redemption of a sovereign God will be used and fulfilled in that ministry.

I once spoke at one of the big department stores in London, and in the question time that followed a young man who was doing very well in this store said to me, “My trouble is that I’m very anxious to get on with my job and get promoted. I’m so anxious to do this that I really have no time to serve Jesus Christ.”

I said, “What on earth are you talking about? You are serving Jesus Christ if you’re giving yourself to your job. And if you do not see yourself as serving Jesus Christ in your job, you’ve got no business to be in it.” In our work we ought to be giving ourselves to the service of God and man under the lordship of Christ. This is the vocational implication.

### **An Ecclesiastical Implication**

Jesus is Lord of the church. And the church is the community of those who acknowledge Jesus as Lord. The apostle Paul called the church the body of Christ. If the church is the body of Christ, Christ is the head of the body. God has exalted Jesus far above all principality and power, put everything under his feet, and “gave him to be the head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:22).

When we accept that Jesus is the Lord of the church, the church will be delivered from clericalism. Clericalism is the clerical domination of the laity by which paid clergy keep laypeople under their thumbs and do not allow them to take

their responsible part in the work of the church. There are many pastors who behave like that, usurping a headship that belongs to Christ alone. The church's human leaders must never behave in such a way as to deny the headship of Christ.

Jesus introduced a new style of leadership into the world. Jesus said that in the secular community people lord it over one another. They exercise authority over one another and manipulate one another. "Not so with you," Jesus said. "Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all" (Mark 6:43–44 NIV). Here is the biblical vision of the true pastor and church leaders. Leadership is not lordship. There must be leadership in the church, but lordship belongs to Christ.

Jesus enlarged on this in Matthew 23, noting how the Pharisees loved to be lords. The Pharisees loved people to bow *to* them and give them deferential titles. They loved to have the chief seats in the synagogue and at the banquets. "But not you," Jesus said. "You're not to call anybody Father, or even teacher in the church." Why not? Well, partly because we are all brothers and sisters, and to give special place to certain members is disruptive of Christian brotherhood. It also usurps the prerogative of the Trinity. We have one Father in heaven, one Lord Jesus Christ, and one Teacher, the Holy Spirit; so we must never offer to another human being that attitude of dependence that we should have toward God alone.

### **A Political Implication**

Jesus is Lord over our life in the secular world. To begin with, our Christian duty is not limited to the church. We who serve the Lord Jesus Christ must take our obedience out into the world where Christ is not acknowledged. The righteousness of the Lord demands not only our individual righteousness. It demands social righteousness as well. This includes the Christian's

business ethics and his tax returns, his relationship to his boss or his employees, his understanding of leisure and art and culture, and his attitude to those in authority roles in the community. And this includes his view of politics as well.

Politics is the life of the *polis*, and *polis* is the secular city. *Polis* is the world into which Jesus has sent his people to act as salt and light. This means that the Christian maintains toward the secular culture and state an attitude that is not conformist but critical. In New Testament days, the affirmation “Jesus is Lord” had tremendous political overtones. Some of the caesars in those days demanded divine honors. They expected to be worshipped as God. A zealous procurator would sometimes parade the citizens of a local town into the forum where there was a bust of the Roman emperor with a little fire burning before it, and he would invite the citizens to sprinkle incense on the bust and proclaim, “Caesar is Lord.” No Christian would do it. How could he say “Caesar is Lord” when Jesus is Lord? He could not bow down and worship the state or Caesar. To say “Jesus is Lord” is a political affirmation. So these Christians went to prison and death rather than deny his lordship.

What about our own day? Is there any application for us? The issue is more blurred. In the Soviet Union and in some countries of eastern Europe, dominant members of the Orthodox communion have contrived a means of living with the state that seems to many of us to involve compromise. But it ill becomes us to criticize from our long-distance security. Protestant Christians in Marxist regimes are far more vulnerable to persecution because they refuse to conform and insist that their proper stance to the state is one of criticism rather than conformity. In the so-called liberal democracies of the West, there are other totalitarian tyrannies that we Christians often fail to recognize and to which we treacherously bow down and worship. There is the tyrant of consumerism, the tyrant of materialism and material affluence. It

is all too easy for us to acquiesce in a civil religion that mistakes the American or European way of life for the Christian way of life and liberally sprinkles the Stars and Stripes (or, if you live in my country, the Union Jack) with holy water. That is civil religion. It is an uncritical bowing down to what is fashionable in the community.

Is there any way in which Christians can commend the lordship of Christ to the non-Christian community? I believe there is. I do not want you to misunderstand me. I am not advocating the old liberal social gospel; I am not trying to rehash it. It is impossible for a biblical Christian to equate social justice with the kingdom of God, for the kingdom of God is not social justice in the secular community. The kingdom of God is a Christological matter. It is only by a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that we can submit to the kingly rule of God and enter the sphere of his kingdom. God's righteousness is fully displayed in God's kingdom alone, that is, among Christian people. But there is a sense in which this righteousness of God can spill over from the Christian community into the world outside.

Let me elaborate for a moment. The church is God's new society. But it is more than that. It is God's new humanity, and God means for the Christian community to demonstrate to the world outside what human community looks like when it comes under the kingly rule of God. In theological terms, this means that the church is the sign of the kingdom. God means the church to exhibit to the wider community outside the true meaning of righteousness, love, freedom, and compassion. If the Christian community demonstrates these attributes as it deals with the secular community, it is acting as society's salt checking decay, and society's light illumining darkness. That is not salvation. That falls far short of redeeming people from sin and judgment. But although it is not salvation, surely we must agree that even among those who do not honor Jesus as Lord,

God prefers love to hate, freedom to oppression, justice to injustice, and peace to strife. It is part of our Christian obedience to Jesus as Lord to seek to promote the standards of Jesus even in the non-Christian community.

### **A Global Implication**

Jesus is Lord of our missionary outreach. Reformed Christians are sometimes criticized for their lack of evangelistic zeal on the ground that belief in God's sovereignty inhibits evangelism. Well, sometimes among Reformed Christians who are not reformed enough—if I may put it like that—this has been true. But I have to say that evangelistic apathy is not part of the Reformed faith. On the contrary, it is our sovereign Lord Jesus claiming all authority in heaven and earth who sends us and commissions us to go into the world to preach the gospel and make disciples, and it is under the authority of this sovereign Lord that we do so. This is the global implication of the lordship of Jesus. Preaching the gospel is the very means that God has ordained to bring his elect to faith in Jesus Christ.

### **Demand for Allegiance**

The lordship of Christ is the most powerful of all missionary incentives. Hindus talk about the Lord Krishna, Buddhists about the Lord Buddha. But we cannot accept them as comparable to the Lord Jesus, for Jesus is God and Savior and they are not. He will not share his glory with another. It was for the sake of his name, in order that due honor be given to the name of Jesus, that all the early missionaries went out. It is for the sake of that same name that we preach the gospel. We long that Jesus should be acknowledged as Lord.

The study of doctrine at Reformed conferences is a very perilous occupation. It is even more so when the object of our study is Jesus as Lord, for it is impossible to study Jesus Christ with cool and detached objectivity. The One we study together has a disconcerting way of refusing to remain an object of scrutiny. He transforms himself from an object of scrutiny into a subject who scrutinizes us. He has a disturbing way of insisting on being precisely what we have been studying: our Lord. The Lord Jesus confronts us now. The Lord Jesus challenges us, the Lord Jesus who alone has authority to bestow salvation upon us and alone has authority to demand our unconditional allegiance.

During the coronation of Her Majesty the Queen in Westminster Abbey, there was a moving scene just before the actual moment when the crown was placed upon her head. The Archbishop of Canterbury as the chief citizen in the country called four times toward each point of the compass—north, south, east, and west—saying, “I present unto you the undoubted queen of this realm. Are you willing to do her homage?” Not until a great affirmative shout had thundered down the nave of Westminster Abbey four times was the crown brought out and placed upon her head. And so I say to you, “I present unto you Jesus Christ as your undoubted King and Lord. Are you willing to do him homage?”