

# HOLY SUBVERSION

Allegiance to Christ in an Age of Rivals



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*Holy Subversion: Allegiance to Christ in an Age of Rivals*

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# JESUS AND THE GOSPEL OF CAESAR



LORD.

Savior of the world.

Son of God.

Divine ruler.

The news of his birth and his rule was called “the gospel.”

His fame was spread throughout the known world by special messengers.

The preachers of his gospel believed he had brought a reign of peace to the whole world, and that he had all authority in heaven and on earth.

Who is this man? If you were to visit a church and ask people to whom these titles and sayings refer, almost everyone would say “Jesus Christ.” And rightly so. The Bible claims that Jesus is Lord, the Savior of the world, God’s Son.

But let’s say you were living in the first century under the rule of the Roman Empire. If you were to enter a town or city and ask people to whom these titles and slogans refer, they would answer differently. *Lord? Savior of the world? Son of God?* “Of course you must be talking about Caesar,” they would say. In the first century, each of these titles described the Roman emperors—powerful men who ruled the world with an iron fist, demanding submission to the ever-expanding empire.<sup>1</sup>

The early Christians used some of the same titles given to

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Caesar in their preaching about Jesus of Nazareth. Why did they do this? And what does this mean for us as Christians today?

### THE WORLD TWO-THOUSAND YEARS AGO

Two-thousand years ago, at the helm of the burgeoning Roman Empire stood the Caesars, named after Julius Caesar, who lived during the first century BC. The early Caesars had been declared “divine” shortly after their deaths. Before long, the Caesars had begun accepting that title of worship during their lives. The emperors commissioned messengers to travel from town to town, preaching allegiance to Caesar. By the time of Jesus, the cult of Caesar worship had begun to spread throughout the empire.

First-century “heralds” visited the cities and villages of the Roman Empire, sharing the “gospel” (good news) of a Caesar’s accession to the throne. As Caesar worship spread, those under Rome’s authority were forced to bow down, confess Caesar as Lord, and pay the appropriate taxes. It didn’t matter whether they approved of Caesar or not. Caesar was sovereign. He was the ruler. You refused to worship him at your own peril! Domitian, one of the late first-century Caesars went so far as to sign his documents, “God.”<sup>2</sup>

At times, Rome could be surprisingly tolerant of other religions. A pantheon of deities was allowed in the Roman Empire as long as Caesar worship trumped them all. The highest loyalty was reserved for the earthly Caesar and his authority. All other rivals had to kneel before his throne. Jewish believers who believed in the one true God were a perfect target for Roman rulers and prefects, men like Pontius Pilate, who often intimidated their Jewish subjects by acts of senseless violence.<sup>3</sup>

### THE FIRST CHRISTIANS

Into this highly charged atmosphere of oppression, a group of men and women began spreading a message about a crucified and

risen Messiah. It was a message that would cost many their lives. The apostles (“sent-ones”) took to the streets of Rome’s cities as heralds, messengers of a new gospel. However, the good news they were sharing was about a Jewish Messiah’s lordship over all creation, not a Caesar’s accession to the throne. They began preaching that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, the Lord of heaven and earth, and the Lord over Caesar himself. Their creed? “Jesus is Lord . . . and God raised him from the dead.”<sup>4</sup>

Christians even took the honorific titles and sayings reserved for God in the Old Testament and applied them to Jesus himself. *There is no other name in heaven or on earth by which people can be saved.*<sup>5</sup> *All authority has been given to him.*<sup>6</sup> *At the name of Jesus, every knee will bow.*<sup>7</sup>

But these titles, derived from Jewish teaching about God, also confronted the Caesar-worship of the first century. The disciples made it clear that the Savior of the world was not the Caesar who provided peace for the nation and pacified people with bread. The Savior is Jesus, who restores us to God and neighbor, and who offers his own body as the bread of eternal life. The disciples recognized that Jesus was the true Lord of the world. Caesar was a phony, a caricature, a parody of the true God.<sup>8</sup>

And the message spread. Christianity began to expand beyond its Jewish heritage. Churches (communities made up of these followers of another king) began to rise up in dark corners of the Roman Empire.

As Rome increased her borders by capturing and enslaving nations and people groups, Christianity grew by proclaiming freedom from the slavery of sin and death.

As the Caesars offered bread to the hungry in order to stay in power, the Christians upstaged the rulers by feeding the hungry themselves in the name of Jesus, the true Lord of the world.

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As Rome's livelihood depended on a wide gap between impoverished slaves and wealthy citizens, the early Christians subverted Rome's economic system by voluntarily selling their belongings, giving to the needy, and treating slaves as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The early Christians submitted nobly to Roman authority, understanding that Caesar did have lawful authority delegated to him by God. Ironically, even though the early Christians faced periods of intense persecution, they still believed that the government was a gift from God and that a king could have a legitimate right to the throne.<sup>9</sup> The Christians subverted the power of Caesar, not by secretly plotting a revolution, but by refusing to give Caesar the honor that belonged to Jesus himself! They believed Caesar needed to be “put in his place”—under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Whenever Caesar exploited his position of power by seeking to rule the world as “god,” the Christians went about their lives, subverting his rule by pledging allegiance to his superior, the Jesus before whom even Caesar would one day bend the knee.

Why did the early Christians act this way? How could they advocate submission to Roman authority even as they subverted Roman exploitation? The answer lies in their understanding of the “powers and principalities” that stood *behind* the earthly, visible Caesar.<sup>10</sup> The early Christians knew that the earthly ruler was not the ultimate enemy. The Caesar-worship of their day pointed beyond the rule of mere men to the presence of the Evil One who seeks to keep people in bondage to sin and death.

## THE “POWERS AND PRINCIPALITIES” TODAY

In the West, we no longer live under the tight-fisted reign of the Caesars of Rome. In modern-day democracy, we choose

our leaders. We elect our representatives. We are our own “Caesar.”

But even if our society is not run by a dictator and even if we are not forced to bow down and worship Caesar as Lord, the same “powers and principalities” that stood behind the Caesar-worship of first-century Rome continue to manifest their presence by dominating the lives of people all around us.

Western societies are not run by human Caesars occupying the throne of a nation’s capital; however, our world still remains under the influence of Satan—the Evil One who seeks to hold people in his clutches by perverting God’s gifts (success, money, leisure, sex, power) and propping them up until they take over our sin-infested hearts and occupy the throne that should belong to Jesus. Unfortunately, many of these “Caesars” go unchallenged by the Christian community. We need to embrace the subversive nature of the first-century message. We must also recognize the insidious nature of the “powers and principalities” from which we need deliverance.

Early Christians posed a threat to Caesar because their message centered on what happened to Jesus of Nazareth on the Sunday morning after his crucifixion. Caesar was not threatened by Christian missionaries telling people they needed a personal Savior, one who will come “to live in their hearts.” He was threatened by a subversive community who believed that a Jewish Messiah had been physically raised from the dead, and who was then living according to the new reality that his resurrection had inaugurated.

The early Christians were persecuted and killed, not only because they had personal relationships with Jesus Christ, but also because they were proclaiming Jesus as Lord. They were applying Caesar’s titles of honor to Jesus Christ. They were subverting the authority of Caesar by appealing to the lordship of Jesus.

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### LIFE-CHANGING AND WORLD-CHANGING FAITH

The lived-out faith of the early Christians was life changing. Just look at Peter, “the Rock,” who—just weeks after denying he knew Jesus—proclaimed that “God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”<sup>11</sup> Or look at the apostle Paul: once a persecutor of Christians, he became Christianity’s most ardent defender and most famous missionary. Or consider Jesus’ own brother James, who once believed his brother to be a madman, only to later realize after Jesus’ resurrection that Jesus was indeed Lord and Savior of the world.

Christianity changes lives. When people trust Jesus as Savior and confess him as Lord, they are transformed. Evangelicals, perhaps more than any other segment of Christianity, believe in the power of Christ to change lives.

But true Christianity is not merely *life*-changing. It is *world*-changing. In the first century, belief in Jesus as Lord ran counter to the claims of Caesar. The lifestyles of the early Christians were deeply subversive of the “powers and principalities” ruling the world. Though they certainly would have agreed that Jesus was their “personal” Lord and Savior, the essence of their gospel proclamation centered on Jesus as the Lord of all—not just Lord of their hearts, but of the whole world. The gospel message was less about people inviting Jesus into their hearts and more about people being invited into the kingdom community that represents God’s heart for the world.

What is God’s future for this world? The early Christians believed that God would one day bring restoration to this broken world. The universe would be redeemed. The faithful who had died would be raised and given glorified bodies. But most importantly, the early Christians believed that this future had *already* broken into the present. The work of restoration and redemption had begun. Through the work of Jesus Christ (his



death and resurrection), the age-to-come had already arrived in this present world.

Even though it seemed the world was ruled by God-hating dictators, Christians clung to an unshakable faith that Jesus was already, in fact, ruling and that the day would come when their faith would be sight. The whole world would see Christ, the world's true King. With boldness and confidence, the early Christians understood the need to begin living in the present according to the future reality, and so they sought to live under the reign of their King.

What would it look like today if we reclaimed the subversive nature of Christian discipleship? How would the royal announcement that Jesus is Lord change our mind-sets with regard to our churches, our families, our jobs? How can our allegiance to Jesus as King be *subversive* once again?

## SUBVERTING THE CAESARS OF TODAY

When I was eight years old, my parents took me to a local high school football game. I didn't understand much about how the game was played, so my favorite part of the experience was watching the marching band perform a rousing rendition of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* during half-time. The inspiring melody passionately performed by the band created an electrically charged atmosphere in that stadium that overwhelmed my childhood senses. I left the stadium believing I had just heard the most beautiful music ever composed.

A couple weeks later, we went to another football game. This time, I decided to take a battery-operated tape recorder with me. I waited anxiously for half-time, and when the band began playing, I pressed "record" on the tape player. I sat back and smiled, convinced that the awe-inspiring music filling the stadium would soon fill my room at home whenever I so desired.

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That evening, I discovered that the playback quality on my tape player was less than stellar. The drums made popping sounds on the tape. The flutes and trumpets sounded like something from a horror movie. My spirit deflated. How was it that the music that had been so glorious in the stadium sounded so terrible in my room? I asked my dad why the tape couldn't recreate that beautiful music from the stadium. Dad replied, "Some music isn't meant for your room."

The gospel isn't meant for just me in my room. The beautiful music that comes from God's people gathered in worship and united in service isn't meant to be performed by one person in one place. The declaration that Jesus is Lord sounds most glorious when it is proclaimed through his church.

When we tailor the gospel only for individuals and make the message solely about a private religious experience, we wind up with a "cassette-tape gospel" that captures a sliver of the message but cannot do justice to the glorious melody of Christ's lordship playing all throughout creation. It is true that the church is made up of individuals who believe that Jesus is Lord. But *together* we form the called-out community of faith: the church—an orchestra divinely commissioned to play the music that proclaims salvation in Jesus Christ alone.

So, how can we *as communities of faith* live in a way that subverts the "Caesars" that rule people around us . . . and seek to rule us too? The rest of this book is devoted to answering that question.

There are two ways to understand the word "subvert" or "subversion." The first definition refers to "overthrowing" or plotting the downfall of a kingdom. The second way that "subverting" something is commonly understood refers to "undermining" or "pushing something back down into its proper place." In this book, I use the term "subversive" in the second

sense. Each of the “Caesars” that we will deal with in this book are good gifts from God that become idolatrous when they are placed above God himself. Therefore, our job as Christians is first to identify and unmask some of the more insidious “Caesars” that seek to muzzle our message and demand our allegiance. Then, we must think through specific ways in which the church can counter our culture by subverting its prevailing idolatries and pushing them back to their rightful place, under the feet of Jesus.

### The Caesar of Self

The first Caesar is the Caesar of Self. Consider the prominence of self-help books, narcissistic fads and diets, and the failed self-esteem movement. Western society is clearly in a love affair with the self, replete with phrases such as “You deserve it,” and “Treat yourself.” We have bought into the rampant individualism of our culture; this explains why thousands of professing Christians can claim Christianity as their personal religion and even believe they possess a superior spiritual life, while never setting foot in a local church or submitting to an outside spiritual authority.

As a community of believers, we subvert the self whenever we preach the gospel that comes to us from outside. Salvation has been accomplished *for* us, by someone else. The cross-centered life is one of continual dying to self and living for God.

The part of the gospel message that we evangelicals tend to leave out is precisely the part that strikes at the heart of the Caesar of Self: the gospel is intended to create a kingdom community—and this community by corporate witness and action declares (in a way that individuals by themselves cannot) that Jesus is Lord.

The gospel unites us to the body of Christ, wherein we find

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our true identity as children of God. Communities of faith are subversive when they place their own personal happiness aside and find joy in putting others first.

### The Caesar of Success

We will also look at ways in which we can subvert the Caesar of Success. Western culture equates success with affluence. Wealth and influence bring power and prestige. We live in a culture that prizes success above everything else. Businesspeople take pride in destroying competitors, gaining more and more material possessions, and seeing fame and personal prosperity as the end result of the “pursuit of happiness.”

The church often mirrors the culture in its definition of success. “Successful” churches have the most wealth, the greatest influence, the most power, and the greatest talent. The early church, however, defined success differently. Churches were successful by relying on the Holy Spirit’s power, by suffering for the cause of Christ, and by maintaining unity and spreading the gospel in the face of imperial persecution.

In order to subvert the Caesar of Success, Christians must guard against a celebrity culture that erodes Christian community. Christians must see faithfulness to Christ and his church as the goal, not the means to greater influence and bigger size. Subversive churches unite with other like-minded churches instead of competing for their members. As Christians point to the Lord, the One from whom all good gifts flow, the Caesar of Success falls to its rightful place at the footstool of the King, who succeeded in his mission by embracing the cross.

### The Caesar of Money

Another Caesar that holds enormous sway over a vast segment of the American population is the Caesar of Money. Jesus said,

“You cannot serve God and Mammon.”<sup>12</sup> “Mammon,” in Jesus’ day, was a personified way of speaking of money. Two thousand years later, we still personify money with titles like “The Almighty Dollar”—a designation that speaks volumes about the power we expect money to wield. We pledge allegiance to this “Caesar” with sayings like “Money is power,” “We’ve got to keep up with the Joneses,” and “The one who dies with the most toys wins.”

Early Christians subverted the economic empire of Rome by seeing themselves as managers of God’s gifts and their money as a blessing to be shared. True Christianity is subversive of money—not in that it rejects all wealth and financial gain, but in that it refuses to allow money to become a dictator. True Christianity does not allow money to ascend to the throne of absolute power.

Churches can show that money is not lord by demonstrating to the world that all money comes from God, embracing a mind-set that focuses on eternal investments over temporal benefits, and showing the world that people matter more than possessions. The best way to subvert the idol of mammon is by giving it away freely. Communities of faith can do this by giving away a large percentage of offerings to other worthwhile mission efforts. The church should not be the end destination for tithes and offerings, but a funnel through which blessing can flow out to the world. These are ways we show the world that money is not the king . . . Jesus is.

#### The Caesar of Leisure

We will devote an entire chapter to discussing the proper place for leisure in our lives. Recreational activities make up part of what it means to be distinctly human. We can enjoy the fruits of our labor, admire beautiful art, soak up the glory of creation,

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and play sports and games for recreation. Yet, leisure is all too ready to leave its proper place in our lives and steal the throne. Instead of being a friend to a hard worker, leisure often morphs into a taskmaster that squeezes the life out of us.

Just as the early church rejected the addictive entertainment of the Roman games, subversive communities of faith will encourage believers to consciously monitor their media intake. In order to subvert the Caesar of Leisure, we must begin thinking seriously about our free time, structuring our time in order to show that God is our first priority, and focusing our leisure time on people instead of the newest distractions of our entertainment culture.

### The Caesar of Sex

The United States has become a sexualized culture. Pornography generates billions of dollars every year, while enslaving countless people to the vice of voyeurism and perverting the normal expectations of sexual expression between men and women in marriage. Sex is used to sell just about everything—cars, books, magazines, even hamburgers and toothpaste! In the last fifty years, we have turned from a well-defined sexual morality to a sexual anarchy that has left broken families, abandoned children, abortion, and sexual addiction in its wake. “Free love” didn’t turn out to be so free after all.

In the chapter on the Caesar of Sex, we will learn that sex is one of God’s good gifts, a treasure that has its place within the marriage covenant. But the Caesar of Sex would have us enslaved to our sexual passions.

Christian communities can subvert the idol of sex in several ways. First, those who are single must commit to chastity (a life of purity), not merely abstinence. Secondly, we should celebrate sex within marriage, which means we will maintain a biblical

understanding of marriage as a covenant. Third, we should be wary of our culture's attempts to separate sex from procreation. We will foster a church culture that celebrates large families and sees children as a gift from God. Lastly, we must work together to put up boundaries in our lives that will protect us from sexual temptation.

#### The Caesar of Power

Those who bow down to the Caesar of Power are quickly corrupted by the desire to obtain or maintain positions of authority. The early Christians realized that power could be a corrosive influence, so they devoted themselves to serving one another. Nothing puts power in its proper place more than service and sacrifice.

As we look at the biblical teaching of power and authority, we will see that power can only be used for good when it is placed at the feet of Jesus as the sovereign Lord. His power and authority was recognized *after* his descent into our world to be the Suffering Servant. He is our model.

Subversive churches share power, instead of concentrating it all in one place. We subvert power by seeing things from a kingdom perspective, meaning that true strength is often found in what seems to the world as weakness. Most importantly, we subvert power by using our authority as a way to benefit the lives of others. Instead of grappling for position and authority, we put others ahead of ourselves. If we were truly subversive of authority and power, our church parking lots would fill up from the back to the front.

### WORLD-CHANGING CHRISTIANITY

If Jesus is King, then we should be spreading his influence into our world by taking up our crosses, denying ourselves, and showing

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that there is a different way to live: a way that subverts the Caesars of our world and exalts our risen Savior, and a way that provides a foretaste of the life to come, that is part of new creation spilling out, in, and over the old world that is passing away.

True Christianity is not merely *life-changing*; it is *world-changing*. Emphasize only the changing of individual lives and we will fail to call political systems, philosophies, and human structures to account under Jesus' lordship. Emphasize only political systems, philosophies, and human structures and we will compromise in our work for worldly progress while people remain dead in their sins. But put the message of Jesus' atoning death on the cross together with the biblical call to bring our world under the lordship of the risen Jesus and we have an explosive message that rocks our world to its very core. It is the apostolic message of Christianity.

True conversion manifests itself in our pledging allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, hence Paul's early formulation of the Christian creed: "Jesus is Lord and God raised him from the dead." Christianity hinges upon Jesus and what has happened to him *in history*. When we confess with our mouths that he is Lord, and believe in our hearts in his resurrection, we are saved.

Acts 17 records the results of this outward transformation:

They dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." (Acts 17:6-7)

What if we heard these words again from those in our own generation? These Christians are turning the world upside down! They are acting against the Caesars of our day.



They are disobeying the Caesar of Success by praying for their competitors, making career choices that put family over finances, and seeking to be above reproach in their business practices.

They are dethroning the Caesar of Money by giving away their possessions and downsizing.

They are acting against the Caesar of Leisure and entertainment by sacrificing vacation time to go to foreign countries to help others who will never be able to return the favor.

They refuse to worship the Caesar of Sex and instead commit themselves to chastity, purity, and faithfulness in marriage for life.

They are acting against the Caesar of Power by modeling the self-giving love of their King.

And most of all, these Christians are saying there is another King—Jesus.

As Christians, we pledge allegiance to Jesus as King. We believe that Jesus, the Messiah of Israel who was crucified for our sins, has been raised from the dead and is now Lord of the universe. This means that we are to put our trust in his sacrifice and live submissively under his lordship.

It is not enough to think that salvation is a mere acceptance of a ticket to heaven that leaves the rest of our life intact. Salvation in Jesus Christ transforms lives. Life transformation leads to involvement in the church. When the community of those who have given allegiance to Jesus Christ lives in such a way as to quietly subvert the Caesars of the day, world transformation follows.

This is what it means to be a Christian.