

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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A MAN UNDER AUTHORITY

by Gary North

And a certain centurion's servant, who was dear unto him, was sick, and ready to die. And when he heard of Jesus, he sent unto him the elders of the Jews, beseeching him that he would come and heal his servant. . . . Then Jesus went with them. And when he was now not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to him, saying unto him, Lord, trouble not thyself: for I am not worthy that thou shouldst enter under my roof. Wherefore neither thought I myself worthy to come unto thee: but say in a word, and my servant shall be healed. For I am a man set under authority, having under me soldiers, and I say unto one, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it. When Jesus heard these things, he marvelled at him, and turned him[self] about, and said unto the people that followed him, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel (Luke 7:2-3, 6-9).

Here we find what Jesus said was the finest statement of faith in all Israel, uttered by a Roman officer. This gentile displayed an understanding of theology vastly superior to the understanding of the religious leaders of the nation. Similar incidents along these lines took place on several occasions in Jesus' ministry. The Hebrew leaders were declared to be less theologically astute than foreigners.

What was so remarkable about the centurion's faith? The striking feature of this incident is that the centurion never actually speaks to Jesus. The Jews come to Jesus, and the centurion's friends come, but not the centurion. Why did he refuse to meet Jesus face to face? Humility. He said that he was unworthy of having Jesus enter his home.

This is an odd sort of humility. He sent intermediaries to Jesus. Wouldn't we expect him to deal with Jesus on a face-to-face basis? If someone was asking another person to heal his servant, wouldn't he want to make the request in person? Would he entrust the task to intermediaries, knowing that he would never even see Jesus?

Jesus as Subordinate

What the man was asking for was a miracle. He understood that God alone could provide such a miracle. But he also knew that man does not confront God face to face. Sinful men are not worthy of meeting God on this basis. To do so would be to die (Ex. 33:20).

What the man needed was an intermediary who could make such a personal request of God. That man was Jesus. So the centurion understood his own limitations as a fallen man. Also, he understood the nature of the authority which Jesus commanded. As a military commander, the centurion possessed analogous authority. He spoke, and his commands were carried out. So great was his authority as a

Roman centurion that he did not need even to supervise directly his subordinates' obedience. Fear would see to it that his commands were obeyed.

How could he know that his commands would be obeyed? Because he himself was under authority. He was a functionary in the Roman Empire. That empire possessed astounding political and military power. Men would listen to him because he represented Rome to Israel. His subordination to authority was the basis of his own authority. It was a chain of command structure. Without his own position as a subordinate, he would have possessed no comparable authority over others. As a soldier, he understood the structure of authority.

What was he testifying concerning Jesus? That Jesus was a subordinate official, too. Jesus could command the servant to get well simply by saying so. How could anyone possess such power? Because the person was subordinate to an even greater power. Thus, the centurion understood that Jesus was God's representative on earth, and wholly subordinate to God. Because of this absolute subordination, Jesus wielded the delegated power of God Himself. Thus, the centurion did not want Jesus to enter his house, any more than a typical householder in the Roman Empire would have relished a visit by the Emperor himself. For a lowly person to come that close to total power is an unnerving experience. The centurion understood this, and preferred to deal with Jesus through intermediaries, just as a resident in the Empire would have chosen to deal with Caesar. The centurion was an intermediary between Israel and the highest earthly power, the Caesar; Jesus was an even greater intermediary to an even greater power.

Junior and Senior Commanders

The centurion expected Jesus to speak, and the deed would be done. He did not think that Jesus had to be present in the house. He regarded Jesus as a true commander. A senior commander sits at headquarters and issues commands. He does not need to journey to each scene of battle. In fact, if he had to do this, he could not command his army. A field-grade officer (major and higher) is marked by his absence from the battlefield. An officer who needs to be nearby in order to see his orders executed is a junior officer. Such an officer has not yet demonstrated his ability to lead.

The centurion was testifying to Jesus' position as God's senior staff officer on earth. Jesus was in command of the forces of heaven. There was no question in the centurion's mind concerning the authority of Jesus and the power of His word. This is why Jesus proclaimed that it was this man above all others in Israel who best demonstrated saving faith.

As a senior officer, the centurion sent his intermediaries. In response as another senior officer, Jesus would send His

servants (or exercise His direct power) over the centurion's sick servant. This is exactly what happened. Jesus sent back the intermediaries, and by the time they arrived, the servant had been healed (v. 10). He never did meet the centurion. He never did enter his house. Because of the centurion's understanding of military authority, he became the wisest theologian in Israel, and because he was the wisest, Jesus never bothered to visit him. He came to heal the sick, not the healthy. The centurion had already subordinated himself to Jesus in principle and by public affirmation; Jesus could therefore devote His time to dealing with others who were not so wise.

The Service Manual

He who refuses to acknowledge his subordination to someone who possesses greater authority cannot rise in the other man's kingdom. To achieve authority which is analogous, though never equal, to a ruling monarch's authority, a person needs to subordinate himself to the one who is in authority.

This need not be a purely hierarchical relationship. The principle of consumer sovereignty in a free market rewards producers who honor the wishes of consumers: no service-no profit. The principle of **service** is the key: either to the one above you or to the ones who finance you.

The biblical doctrine of creation points to the One who is ultimately sovereign: God the Creator. The doctrine of the incarnation points to the One who is subordinately sovereign: Jesus Christ. This is what the centurion acknowledged. Thus, to become the beneficiary of the blessings of God, and to avoid the wrath of God, men must covenant themselves to God. They must subordinate themselves to His peace treaty. This treaty has numerous clauses. We call these clauses biblical laws.

The Bible is a kind of **service manual**, in both senses of the word: service to God and man, and also a repair manual. It provides men with the standards of institutional repair or reconstruction.

The Chain of Command

No army is conceivable apart from a rule book. There is no chain of command without a book of rules. The Bible provides these rules. There is no chain of command without an enforcing agent. The Bible informs us of three sovereign hierarchical agencies: church courts, civil courts, and the family. These are God's ordained monopolistic institutions. Thus, to achieve success, a society must seek to build each of these institutions within the overall blueprint or framework of biblical law.

When Moses set up the appeals court structure in Exodus 18, he became a true commander. Before that, he had attempted to rule by direct command. This was wearying him and the people, his father-in-law said. It was reducing

Moses' ability to serve as a commander. Moses then set up a chain of command, which was in fact a bottom-up chain of appeals. In order for him to be able to direct them in battle, he needed to find others who could settle personal and institutional conflicts. It was better for the people to put up with human justice, with all its weaknesses, than for people to stand in long lines hoping to get perfect justice from God through the mouth of Moses. It was also better for Moses to serve as a military and religious commander than as a full-time judge.

Thus, the chain of command, though imperfect, is beneficial, even when compared to God's perfect justice, if such justice is administered by one lone man. Without the subordination of the Hebrews to imperfect judges, they could not possibly have settled their disputes. At some point, men must say to themselves: "I must get on with life and get out of court. I would rather suffer injustice rather than waste resources in a potentially fruitless quest for better justice, let alone perfect justice." Better to suffer loss, once, and get on with life, than to paralyze oneself in a one-man quest for perfect justice.

This is a fundamental principle of dominion. It is usually better to put up with minor imperfections in the chain of command than to seek better justice. There are times when the justice-seeker should stand his ground, as the widow sought justice from the unjust judge by pestering him into submission, but not often (Luke 18:1-8). Life is too short and resources are too limited.

Conclusion

The centurion acknowledged his subordination to Jesus because he understood that Jesus was subordinate to God with respect to His earthly command. The centurion also understood the source of Jesus' power: that very subordination. No one else in Israel had such a fundamental understanding of Jesus' authority.

It is a mark of the centralization of modern society that men will not subordinate themselves to God through faith in the atoning work and sovereign power of Jesus Christ. They subordinate themselves to someone or something, but often grudgingly. They much prefer power without subordination, and when they cannot achieve it in this fashion, they grow resentful. They rebel, or they subordinate themselves to some false god, institution, or quest. They seek power apart from God, and they find themselves under the condemnation of God. They seek autonomous power and discover that they are impotent. They refuse to acknowledge that in order to gain authority they must be under authority, and that one over them must in turn possess authority in terms of his subordination. Ethical subordination to God requires institutional subordination to one or more of God's institutional chains of command. To be an elder, one must rule a family properly (I Tim. 3). Good rulership is derived from good servanthship, both temporally and organizationally.

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