

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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PROGRESSIVE RESPONSIBILITY

By Gary North

The apostle Paul recognized the necessity of Christians exercising leadership, first within the Christian community, and later in the very processes of the cosmos. When the sin-plagued Corinthian church faced a major disciplinary problem, Paul wrote to them that they should handle it themselves. They should not appeal to a secular law court, implying that since the court would not be governed by the standards of biblical law, it would be a poor testimony to seek judgment there. It was wrong in principle because it would appear to sanction the validity of Satan's rule over the church. "Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters" (I Cor. 6:2)? Not only will the saints judge the world, they will also judge the angels, Paul said. If we shall judge the angels, "how much more the things that pertain to this life" (I Cor. 6:3b)?

To humble them, and to demonstrate how important it was for them to stay out of the civil courts, Paul advised them: "If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church" (I Cor. 6:4). In other words, the least esteemed member of the local church was far better fit to make a valid judgment of the dispute than the high officials in the civil courts. As Paul said in the next sentence, "I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? No, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren" (I Cor. 6:5)? Paul really preferred that they find a competent, experienced man of judgment within the congregation. He really did not want the least esteemed man to judge. But he had made his point: better the least esteemed man in the church—someone who would not normally be regarded as a reliable ruler—than a civil magistrate in Corinth.

Good Law, Inexperienced Judges

What we should understand from the beginning is that we are the recipients of a law structure which is the proper foundation for all our personal decisions. This law structure has been designed to fit the external realm of human action. It has been designed by God to provide a productive order. When men are exposed to the preaching of the whole counsel of God, they are able to begin to make valid distinctions between right and wrong. They can begin to deal with the sins in their own lives, and from there they can begin to handle the sin-created disputes in the local church. So reliable is the law of God, that Paul could tell the Corinthians that the least esteemed man in the church, with only a vague conception of the proper application of biblical law, was a preferable judge than the master of humanistic law in the local Corinthian court. Better to subject

oneself to an inexperienced judge who has a vague understanding of God's revelation than a skilled lawyer who is not guided by the precepts of biblical law. That is how much more reliable the law of God is than the humanistic laws of the pagan civil governments.

Paul was not writing to citizens of a Christian political order. He was not saying that there should be no civil government, either. He himself appealed to Caesar when he believed his case was being handled improperly (Acts 25:11). However, his dispute was not with members of the church in this case. When he wrote to church members who were living in a pagan political order which meant a pagan religious order—he advised them to create an alternative order, a Christian order in which their disputes with each other would not be revealed to the pagans around them, and in which these disputes might be resolved peacefully in terms of a revealed law-order. He warned them not to submit their institutional disputes for judgment by a representative of a rival institutional order. They were not to allow themselves to be dominated by their religious opponents, whose commitment was to other gods and other law-orders.

Would this not create problems within the church? Obviously, the problems were there already. It was a question of how to solve these problems with the least display of subservience to the pagan world. It was the responsibility of the members to become skilled in settling disputes in the local church. Until this was done, there was no way that they could come before the pagans of their day to announce a new king, with a new law-order. They could not begin to exercise dominion over the face of the earth if their own internal conflicts were being settled by representatives of an enemy law-order. They were not supposed to subordinate themselves before a rival law court, except in a case in which the members of the pagan civil order had unrighteously brought charges against them, or were trying to defraud them. In such a case, they might legitimately go to court, since there was no way to compel the members of pagan society to submit to the judgment of the church court.

Theocracy vs. Ecclesiocracy

Was Paul arguing for some sort of ecclesiocracy? Was he trying to get the whole world under the authority of church courts? Did he envision a day in the future when everyone will be a church member, and the church courts will take the place of the despised civil courts? Paul never said so.

What Paul was arguing for was **theocracy**—the rule of God's law. He was **not** arguing for ecclesiocracy, meaning civil rule by

priests or ministers. He did see that it was better to settle disputes among church members without appealing to a rival religious order to restore peace. Yet in Romans 13:1-7, he acknowledged the legitimacy of civil rulers. He even called them ministers. Paul's theology held that there are two basic ministerial offices, civil rulers and elders in the church. Neither is to replace the other. Neither can perform all the functions of the other. Neither is to be vested with comprehensive, monopolistic sovereignty. But both are to be governed by God's law.

His unwillingness to allow the Corinthian church to appeal to the civil magistrate was based on his understanding of the inherent rivalry between two competing law-orders. It was not a question of the separation of church and state which undergirded his argument. In that era, the Corinthian church was not able to appeal to civil magistrates who were governed by the terms of biblical law. It was not that the church courts should always rule in disputes between Christians; it was that God's law should always rule in disputes between Christians; it was that God's law should have a monopoly of lawful authority in disputes between Christians. It was not that the civil law should be transformed into ecclesiastical law; it was that both ecclesiastical law and civil law should be conformed to God's law, with neither the church nor the state possessing an absolute monopoly of lawful authority.

Paul was not arguing for the rule of church courts over every area of life, but he was arguing against the concept of neutral law. If the saints shall judge the world, then neutral law is a myth. A man must judge in terms of standards. An act is right or wrong, acceptable or prohibited. If Christians are to judge the angels, then they must do so within a framework of morality designed by God and revealed to man. The Corinthian Christians were to stay out of pagan law courts precisely because there is no neutral civil law. Civil law, like church law, is governed by religious presuppositions concerning morality. Religious civil law may be defended in terms of a philosophy of universal neutralism, but such an argument is itself intensely religious and unneutral, for there are irreconcilable conflicts between biblical law's grounding in God's revelation and any other law-order which is not grounded in His revelation. The judgment of this world by the saints testifies to the absence of neutral law and neutral lawyers or judges. It is the saints who are the judges, not the self-professed neutralists. There will be no neutrality on the day of judgment. It will be the universal rule of God's law which prevails.

Good Law, Experienced Judges

The Corinthians were to seek out the most competent judges within the membership of the church. They were to elevate these men to the seat of authority. These men, not pagan judges, were to be preferred by the members in the settlement of disputes.

Was Paul forever closing the door to an expansion of godly rule? He was not a defender of ecclesiocracy. He acknowledged the civil ruler's role as minister of God. So what did he have in mind? How could the influence of the gospel be legitimately restricted to the institutional church? How could pagan magistrates continue to exercise dominion if and when the gospel spread across the land? With the triumph of the Christians in the life of Rome, East and West, the pagan civil magistrates were replaced by Christians, from the fourth century onward. Were the newly ordained Christian civil magistrates to govern in terms of the older pagan law-order—the very law-order that Paul had advised the Corinthians to avoid in every instance of intra-church conflict? Or were they instead to reconstruct the civil law-order to conform to biblical standards set forth for civil rule?

Paul was not trying to keep the Corinthian church in bondage to less experienced judges. He did tell them to find the best men to handle cases. But was he telling them to avoid dominion tasks like taking over positions in the civil government? He never said so. In fact, his strong emphasis on the reliability of godly rule by Christian leaders in the church—experienced, competent leaders if they could be located—testifies to his preference for competence. But his letter advised the Corinthians to seek first the rule of God's law, not human competence as such; only after the rule of God's law was agreed upon were they to seek out the most competent men to rule over them. It was God's law which has pre-eminence in judgement, not certified competence. Nevertheless, within the agreed-upon framework of Christian institutional rule, the best men are to be elevated to positions of authority. God's law, **then** competent judges: here is Paul's message to the church. Men's competence is to be attained by means of God's law. Technical competence in law is not to be preferred to biblical law, for there is no such thing as technical competence as such, or neutral law as such. **The standard is biblical law**, administered with or without great technical competence.

Where are men to gain the preferred competence? Obviously, by becoming familiar with the terms of biblical law. First, they learn as **children** (Deut. 6:6-7). Second, they learn as **church members** in churches governed by elders who respect biblical law (I Cor. 6). Third, they learn as **deacons**, who assist the elders in the less crucial responsibilities, like the administration of charity (Acts 6:1-4). This office is a sort of apprenticeship position. Fourth, men may be appointed to the office of church **elder** (I Tim. 3). But this presumes that they have already approved themselves in the fifth office, that of **family head** (I Tim. 3:4-5), which is also a requirement for deacons (I Tim. 3:12).

This, however, is only the beginning. Men are also to serve in positions of authority in business, the military, medicine and other professions, the civil government, and wherever God's law applies. (It applies wherever men make decisions for which they are responsible before God; only in those zones of life for which men will never have to give an account of their actions—in the neutral zones of life—does biblical law not apply. Anyone who denies the rule of God's law must explain, using the Bible as his source, just where such zones are.) Men are to become competent rulers—judges, if you prefer—in their labor. **Their callings before God are training grounds for the exercise of godly judgment.**

The doctrine that the church and its members will experience an endless set of failures until the day of judgment, whereupon the saints shall judge the world with Christ, has this curious implication: experience in exercising godly judgment is best attained through constant failure and the inability of saints to gain positions of authority, in time and on earth. In other words, Christians will never rule on earth, and therefore they will rule after the final judgment. Those Christians who argue that individual saints will be far removed forever from the seats of power or even the corridors of power, until the day of judgment itself, are building a theoretical case for the success of **off-the-job** training. They are arguing for perpetual childhood and subservience: domination by rebellious rulers—ever-more consistent, ruthless, and lawless rulers—is the way to become competent rulers. But the Bible tells us that a sign of God's judgment is to be ruled by children (Isa. 3:4). We need an eschatology which offers us a doctrine of **progressive responsibility**, a doctrine of **maturing judgment**. We need a concept of **on-the-job training and promotion through competence**.