

A QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

*Y*ou probably remember the story of Jesus and the centurion, right? It's a fairly popular story told in Christian circles because of the celebration Jesus makes of the man's faith. And it was truly worth celebrating, by any standard. But I think that most of us don't realize just how big of a deal it was. It wasn't just a matter of a man with uncommon faith. It was a very definite statement on the authority of the entire Roman Empire.

Just to refresh your memory, the centurion approaches Jesus one fine day and asks if Jesus could help his servant who lay at home paralyzed and suffering. This alone says something for the character of the man. Jesus replies that He will go and heal the servant. The centurion says with remarkable perception and humility (or perhaps he wasn't quite willing to have this Jewish man in his home) that he wasn't worthy to have Jesus under his roof. Would Jesus please send the word and his servant would be healed. The centurion went on to say that he understood Jesus' position because he was also a man under authority, with soldiers under him. He knew that if Jesus said He wants this or that done, it would be done, and he believed that if Jesus gave the word, the healing would happen.

This is coming from a Roman. A Roman soldier, none the less, not just a random, beaten-down citizen who doesn't give a hoot 'n a holler about people's perceptions. **A Roman soldier with rank who recognized AND publicly validated the authority of Jesus Christ.**

Not too bad.

But it gets even better when you think about the perspective and belief system of the day. The Romans believed in one, all-pervasive, all-encompassing thought: the State. Everything existed for the purpose of the State, everything revolved around the State and everything flowed through the State. There was not a celebration of individualism or separation of thought – all paths lead to one end. The good of the State. A significant component of this belief system at the time was the role of the Emperor. In many such cases where there is one prevailing belief system there emerges a leader who becomes the epitome of that belief. He is the focal point. This has given rise to many of the world's absolute monarchies and totalitarian governments. Regardless of what the particular religious belief may be, or if there is any at all, the primary issue is that all authority rests within the hands of this leader. Whether we are talking about the great Persian kings who considered themselves gods, or a dictator like Hitler, we have the same thread woven through and through.

So, in Rome, the Emperor was THE MAN. There was no authority other than him. If there were to be so acknowledged, the entire intricate framework that held the State together would begin to crumble. In truth, the rise of Christianity in the days after Jesus' ascension was more a political threat than a religious one.

What was that centurion *thinking*?



He was a soldier. Romans were a conquering sort of people, so being a soldier was an even higher honor in society. He would know the rules inside and out. He would know the primacy of the State and the threat that any other recognized authority would bring to their way of life.

I wish that we knew more about where he came from and if he had run into Jesus on other occasions. I wonder if he had listened silently in the back of the crowd a few of the times that Jesus spoke. Or I wonder if he watched Jesus dealing with the Pharisees and thought, “only a man who knew what he was doing and where it was coming from would mess with that bunch!”

Somewhere, somehow, at some point in the story, his heart was transformed. Perhaps God had begun the work long before Jesus ever appeared on the scene. Since the centurion was a man of authority himself, it would not be a huge leap to recognize when someone else carried authority. He would have learned to quickly tell the difference between those who pretended they had authority and those who actually had it. But something beautifully and wonderfully huge happened inside of this Roman for him to see it in this Jewish man and publicly acknowledge a source of authority outside of Rome.

For that time and all of history, Jesus made a statement about the kingdoms of man. Here, in the middle of Roman occupation, surrounded by their money and heavy handed ways, Jesus comes with a rabble of fishermen and impresses the socks off this battle-worn Roman soldier. I imagine this man had seen a few men swagger and boast in his day, and lent a helping hand in enforcing their claims! And who was this Jew with no army and no money? He was the King, the One and Only Lord of all the earth, and this centurion knew it.

Every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess the Kingship of the One who sees the nations as drops in a bucket. Try that one on for size, Rome.

Long live the King of Kings!

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