

Servants of the One Lord

A PERSON UNDER AUTHORITY

Where do we stand as human beings when we relate with one another? Are we free-standing units, separate, independent, and over against one another as persons? Do we each stand on our own patch of ground, and attempt to relate with one another from there? Or is there common ground on which we stand, and one light that shines upon us all?

Jesus commended the faith of a man who recognised Jesus' true relationship with the Father of all:

When he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, 'Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.' And he said to him, 'I will come and cure him.' The centurion answered, 'Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go," and he goes, and to another, "Come," and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this," and the slave does it.' When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith' (Matt. 8:5–10).

A cursory reading of this may conclude that the centurion's faith consisted in his belief that Jesus had the power to heal with a spoken word from a distance. This would be consistent with a view of Jesus that saw him as having direct power in himself, the way we may wish to have for ourselves. We need

Servants of the One Lord

to pay close attention to what the centurion says. Why does he say, 'I *also* am a man under authority'? Whom else is he referring to? He is saying that in Jesus he has recognised a person in a similar position to his own: a person who does not exercise power from himself on his own, but who exercises it by virtue of being a person under the authority of another, whose power it is. The centurion was saying that Jesus could cure his servant, not because he has great power in himself to speak a healing word over a distance, but that, because Jesus was directly under the authority of the Father of all, whatever he speaks will have the force of a word spoken by the Creator of the universe, and so will be effective. This is what amazed Jesus. This relationship of Jesus with the Father was denied by the leaders of Israel (see Matt. 12:24; 21:23–27; compare John 5:18; 10:31–33), and was the grounds on which they finally executed him (Matt. 26:63–66). Yet here it is recognised and acknowledged by a Gentile centurion (compare Matt. 27:54).

The centurion had indeed seen and trusted what Jesus maintained was the heart of his own being and ministry:

Jesus answered them, 'My Father is still working, and I also am working . . . Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing' (John 5:17, 19–20).

Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him' (John 8:28–29).

Jesus was not a person acting or speaking on his own from himself. He was always in relationship with the Father, as a person under authority, and so was speaking the words and doing the works of the Father. This active relationship of

Power in Relationships

love between the Son and the Father lay at the heart of the saving action of the cross:

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father (John 10:17–18).

I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way (John 14:31).

It would be a mistake, however, to see Jesus as a person under authority, to refer solely to his divinity as the Son of God. The reason Jesus went to the cross was so that the relationship that he has with the Father might also be experienced by us:

Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world . . . I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:24, 26).

Jesus anticipated this when others objected to his aligning himself with the Father:

The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus replied, ‘I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?’ The Jews answered, ‘It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.’ Jesus answered, ‘Is it not written in your law, “I said, you are gods”?’ If those to whom the word of God came were called “gods”—and the scripture cannot be annulled—can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, “I am God’s Son”? If I am not doing the works of my Father,

Servants of the One Lord

then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father' (John 10:31–38).

This is the very relationship that Jesus prayed would be ours as well:

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us . . . so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:21, 23).

This is what we have been made for as human beings in the image of God (see Eph. 1:4–5; Rom. 8:29; compare Gen. 1:26; 5:1–3). What the centurion saw, then, was not only the divine Son of God. He also saw at last the true human being—not one who says, 'I am, and there is no one besides me' (Isa. 47:8), but a person wholly under the very authority of God in love, and so moving in the true power of God.

SERVANTS OF ANOTHER BEFORE THEIR OWN LORD

Paul makes it clear that this understanding and reality of human beings as persons under authority is to govern our relating with one another, especially from positions of power. It is not just those in authority who represent the power of God under the authority of God. Every human being—power differentials notwithstanding—is a person under the authority of God first and foremost, and is to be treated accordingly.

In Romans 14, when Paul is addressing the disputed matters of what food may be eaten and what days should be observed as special, he makes it clear that a proper response is to be determined by the reality that each person in the Christian community has a direct relationship and responsibility under the Lord, which is to be respected. The welcoming

Power in Relationships

Lordship of Christ and of God is paramount in all things. When all regard each other as belonging and responsible to the one Lord, then we will be restrained from lording it over each other:

Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand (Rom. 14:3–4).

As each honours the Lord in what they do or refrain from doing, fully convinced in their own minds, they are to be respected in so doing. The underlying reality is enunciated clearly:

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living (Rom. 14:7–9).

The practical conclusions follow:

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written,

‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God.’

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another (Rom. 14:10–13).

Naturally, when a fellow-believer ‘is detected in a transgression’ (Gal. 6:1), action is to be taken to restore such a one. This is the responsibility together of those ‘who have received

the Spirit', not just of the elders. It is to be done in the fullness of the gospel of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, with great care and gentleness, and with marked self-watchfulness. Jesus set out the proper approach in Matthew 18:14–20, and we see Paul implementing it in 1 Corinthians 5, 2 Corinthians 2:1–11, and 1 Timothy 5:17–22 (in the case of disciplining elders). All of this is done consciously in the presence and under the Lordship of Christ, in a way that precludes persons from taking the law into their own hands.¹

We will see now how this applies to a number of categories of relationships: elders and youngers, employers and employees, husbands and wives, children and parents, and governments and citizens.

Elders and Youngers

Accountability under God, on the part of both, is to govern relationships between elders and youngers:

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for

‘God opposes the proud,
but gives grace to the humble.’

¹ This is considered in more detail in the Monthly Ministry Study for May 2007, ‘Sin and Others—2’ (see <http://www.newcreation.org.au/studies/pdf/2007_05min.pdf>). The bulk of Gregory’s *Pastoral Rule* (book 3) is taken up with a wide range of different conditions of persons and how they are to be approached accordingly in each instance. It repays attentive study. In pastoral care, there is no ‘one size fits all’. Compare Isa. 28:23–29.

Power in Relationships

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you (1 Pet. 5:1–7).

Employers and Employees

Belonging together under the one Lord also governs relationships between masters and slaves or, as we would put it today, between employers and employees:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality.

Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven (Col. 3:22–4:1).

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.

And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality (Eph. 6:5–9).

Husbands and Wives

We have already looked at the subtle differentiation, mutuality and rightful ordering of the relationship between husbands and wives.² A re-reading of Ephesians 5:21–33 and Colossians 3:18–19, in the light of what we have been saying

² See 'Joint Heirs of the Grace of Life', chapter 3.

Servants of the One Lord

here, will highlight how they are to relate with each other through the relationship that each has with the Lord Jesus Christ: 'as is fitting in the Lord'.

Children and Parents

Similarly, children are to relate with their parents 'in the Lord', and parents with their children 'in the discipline and instruction of the Lord' (see Col. 3:20–21; Eph. 6:1–4).³

Governments and Citizens

It is not just within the Christian community that this reality operates. The Old Testament made clear that non-believing nations and their rulers, whether they acknowledged God or not, were no less under God's authority and accountable to God (see e.g. Isa. 10:5–19; 45:1–7; Dan. 2:20–21; 4:17). This is carried over into the New Testament:

For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right . . . As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor (1 Pet. 2:13–14, 16–17).

See here how the rulers are to conduct themselves as sent by God with regard for those under them (compare Rom. 13:1–7), and those subject to them are to relate freely with the rulers in the fear of God 'as servants of God'.

³ When I baptised my eldest child, I remember well being taken by surprise at a sudden given consciousness that he was now my brother in Christ before he was my son. This makes quite a difference to how parenting is practiced.

IN THE LORD

In the way the apostles speak about each of these sets of relationships, we find such words as: ‘under the mighty hand of God’, ‘fearing the Lord’, ‘for the Lord’, ‘from the Lord’, ‘you serve the Lord Christ’, ‘you also have a Master in heaven’, ‘as is fitting in the Lord’, or simply ‘in the Lord’, ‘of the Lord’, ‘for the Lord’s sake’, and ‘as servants of God’. We are left in no doubt that, whatever the relationship, we are never to relate with another person on our own, but only ever in Christ.

We see an early precursor to this in the relationship between David and Jonathan in the Old Testament. We are told that ‘Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul’ (1 Sam. 18:3). Jonathan later described this covenant in these terms:

Go in peace, since both of us have sworn in the name of the LORD, saying, ‘The LORD shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever’ (1 Sam. 20:42).

As this situation unfolded, they later renewed their covenant, again ‘before the LORD’ (see 1 Sam. 23:15–18). Whatever their personal links, Jonathan’s and David’s relationship with each other was primarily in the Lord, and with each other only through Him.

One friend of mine said: ‘Every relationship is full of sin!’ How can any relationship operate rightly without the total forgiveness of sin that we have in Jesus Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from his experience of Christian community in the preacher’s seminary at Finkenwalde, and in the ‘Brother’s House’ there, wrote in his book *Life Together*:

Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it

Servants of the One Lord

be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.⁴

This means that we should never relate directly with any other human being. We should only ever relate with another person through the Lord Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer went on to say:

Because Christ stands between me and others, I dare not desire direct fellowship with them. As only Christ can speak to me in such a way that I may be saved, so others, too, can be saved only by Christ himself. This means that I must release the other person from every attempt of mine to regulate, coerce, and dominate him with my love. The other person needs to retain his independence of me; to be loved for what he is, as one for whom Christ became man, died, and rose again, for whom Christ brought forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Because Christ has long since acted decisively for my brother, before I could begin to act, I must leave him his freedom to be Christ's; I must meet him only as the person he already is in Christ's eyes. This is the meaning of the proposition that we can meet others only through the mediation of Christ. Human love constructs its own image of the other person, of what he is and what he should become. It takes the life of the other person into its own hands. Spiritual love recognises the true image of the other person which he has received from Jesus Christ; the image that Jesus Christ himself embodied and would stamp upon all men.⁵

The presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, active among us in God's great saving holy love, is what will keep us from lording it over one another.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, SCM Press, 1954, p. 11. First published 1939 under the title of *Gemeinsames Leben*, translated from the fifth edition (1949) by John W. Doberstein.

See further: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer> accessed 25th May 2008.

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, pp. 25–6.

Power in Relationships

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

- *What did the centurion see in Jesus that made him say, 'I also am a man under authority'?*
- *What does this tell us about the true standing of human beings?*
- *'It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand' (Rom. 14:4): how does this affect our relationship with people with whom we may disagree?*
- *What difference does it make that relationships between elders and youngers, employers and employees, husbands and wives, children and parents, and governments and citizens, are 'in the Lord'?*
- *'We should never relate directly with any other human being. We should only ever relate with another person through the Lord Jesus Christ.' What does this mean in practice (think of another person with whom you are in relationship)? Why is this so?*