

The Complete Centurion

Robert W. Bertram

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This essay was originally presented as a lecture at the Evangelische Akademie in Bad Boll, West Germany, on Oct 25, 1965, when the author was working as a Fulbright guest research professor at the Institut für ökumenische Theologie, the University of Munich. The evangelical academies provide forums for reconciling dissident groups within modern society—in this case the military establishment on the one hand and its civilian critics on the other. The military was represented by the U.S. Army Europe, the Army of the French Republic, the Bundeswehr of the West German Republic, and the Swiss Army. The civilian sector was represented by a historian, a lawyer, and the present author, who is professor of systematic theology and chairman of the department at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

Any day now should bring with it a crop of good jokes about that prolific benefactor of our age, the dialog. The wonder is that the jokes have not appeared sooner, considering how quick men normally are to record their thanks for such a boon in their humor – the way they once did, remember, for GI Joe or for their pastors or for the soup kitchens or, in the days of great piety, for God. When the dialog finally does rate the affection of their humor, at least one of the jokes will begin like this: “It seems there were these French and German and American generals, gathered at the site of an old Roman spa and dialoguing about the modern military implications of Christianity – yes I did say that: ‘military’ – and after three days they even let in a theologian – well, a sort of theologian, an American theologian

. . . " If the story evokes laughter, it will not be because the situation was so impossible but because it was, as humor and the holy always are, so fittingly human, so natural. As of this morning that story would have the additional virtue of being historically true.

1. THE PROBLEM

It is likewise fitting that the theologian on this assignment should take all the help he can get from the Scriptures. This gives him no right, of course, to disregard canonical military authorities like du Picq and Scharnhorst and MacArthur, not if he hopes to do any name-dropping. And he probably has no excuse for restricting his military reading to that military bible of the Americans, *The Officer's Guide* (not even last year's addition), except that the book is really supra-American in the debt it still owes to Baron von Steuben and, through von Steuben, to Marshal Maurice de Saxe. But a theologian has first responsibility to another literature. Especially as spokesman for the evangelical confessions at an evangelical academy, it is only reasonable that he should stay close to the evangel at its historical source. One Biblical source that comes to mind, but only as a case study, is a familiar healing story from the eighth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew (only roughly paralleled in Luke): Jesus heals the servant of the centurion at Capernaum.

The topic assigned to me reads, "What Makes a Whole Man?" The story of the centurion leaves little doubt that it was the centurion himself every bit as much as it was his dying servant back home who "was made *whole*." He was also, by his own description, "a man under authority." That is almost a verbatim restatement of the theme of this conference: "Men Under Orders." So then, in the idiom of our agenda, what made this remarkable centurion, this man under authority, the whole man that he was?

The centurion, however, was not only *under* authority. He also wielded authority. As he explained, he not only took orders but also gave them: "I am a man . . . 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 he does it." The centurion was an officer. So is each one of you, and field grade at that. This is a fact which this lecture, if it is going to be theological, dare not ignore. This analysis of the whole man ought to be about officers, not enlisted men or noncommissioned officers, for the simple reason that it is to officers that the lecture is being addressed. Theology, although it may not be entitled to preach and even though it may never be cast in the second person, is to this extent unabashedly pastoral: The people *to* whom it speaks are the same ones *about* whom it speaks. If instead it restricts its descriptions to men whom it never confronts, it degenerates into gossip. So this lecture, like the centurion himself, is meant to be about present company – which gives it the advantage of being corrigible by those who have most at stake in correcting it. The question now reads: What makes a man, who not only is under authority but also commands it, a whole man?

2. WHOSE PROBLEM

Is it a fair reading of Matthew's account to say that it was the centurion in the story, as much as the servant, who was made whole? After all, it is clearly the servant who is named in the diagnosis ("My servant is lying paralyzed at home, in terrible distress") and also in the clean bill of health at the end ("and the servant was healed at that very moment"). Isn't it the servant then who carries the story-line from problem to solution – unless of course we spiritualize his medical problem away as being theologically unworthy of comparison with the centurion's noble odyssey of faith? Well, let us hope that such an

unearthly, pitiless interpretation is not even a temptation for us. Nor is that the only exegetical alternative.

The centurion does indeed have a problem, and his problem is his sick servant. The point is, though, that the servant's problem, in all its medical concreteness, is no less the centurion's problem. That should be clear from the lengths to which the centurion goes to get his man healed. Yes, but it is after all the servant who gets healed, isn't it, and not the centurion – except perhaps that, with the servant now back on his feet, the centurion can once more return to business as usual? But then why is so much made of the centurion, and not just of his faith but of the decisive part his faith plays in the recovery of his servant? “Go; be it done for *you* as you have believed.” The centurion's own involvement in the solution as well as the problem is too prominent to be ignored. The fact is, by the time the story is over the centurion himself, far from merely being restored to business as usual, has come into a wholeness that far surpasses the piety of Israel and any power or authority (*exousia*) he himself had ever had before. Wholeness might well be too weak a word for it. He has become the beneficiary, but also the agent, of an *exousia* simply unknown to the previous order of things.

Now, in retrospect, it is clear what the centurion's problem had been: a breakdown in authority. Here, in the mortal agony of one of his men, he had come to the end of his power. Here was one time when he could command, “Go” or “Come” or “Do this,” until he was blue in the face and nothing would come of it. His slave did not respond to treatment, and that was as much a defeat for the centurion as insubordination would have been. The incurable suffering of his slave, to whom he was deeply attached, reveals how little the centurion was a free individual with a private life of his own. What afflicted his slave afflicted him. He shared his servant's enslavement. This coenslavement of his, if

it may be called that, marked the end of the centurion's autonomy. And not only of his autonomy but also of his authority. In the agony of his slave the centurion's authority came to an end: not the way a man comes to the end of his reach with nothing beyond but the way he comes to a dead end, stopped short by an opposing force. The centurion's authority collided, but with what? With the same authority. And he was in the middle. On the one hand, there was no question of what he was under authority to do: he had to save his servant. But just as surely he was having to let him die. To that authority, too, he had to yield. But in both cases, for life and for death, it was the same high authority. His authority to do the highest human thing, to help a comrade, was now paralyzed by the same ultimate authority, which also puts comrades beyond help. It was the end of the centurion's autonomy and the end of his authority. And third, it was the end of his merit. He had no recourse from his dilemma. But why not? Was it because such dilemmas are inevitable in the order of things? True, they are. But that was not what limited him. He had no recourse simply because he deserved none. "Lord, I am not worthy." This impasse of his between duty and death, which could hardly be his fault and seems utterly amoral, impersonal, accidental, turns out instead to be only too reasonable. It is exactly what he has coming to him. The end of his autonomy, the end of his authority, the end of his merit.

Yet the centurion, with all the appearance of being insubordinate, refused to accept this supreme authority as supreme, as the last word, even though it ruled supreme throughout the world order: in polio and galaxies and the history of nations and the law of God. Surrender is what every rationalist and moralist would have done; that is, every religious reactionary. Yet the centurion, though he did not deserve it, dared to expect the incursion of a revolutionary new

order of things here and now. That is, he dared to expect it from the hand of Jesus, whom he salutes as Kyrios, appealing to nothing else than sheer mercy. You know the rest. On orders from his new Lord, the centurion returned to his post, back to the old order, though no longer merely to perpetuate it but rather, as an authorized subversive, to heal it – till the day of its replacement. Compared with this new wholeness of the centurion himself, the recovery of his servant appears pale.

3. COENSLAVEMENT

This three-phase diagnosis of the centurion's problem – his coenslavement, his authority bind, his unworthiness – has transfer value for the similar problems of officers elsewhere. First, his coenslavement. The centurion was not the last officer whose own wholeness, or brokenness, was inextricably intertwined with the wholeness and brokenness of his men. That is a fact of life for every officer who has any troop responsibilities at all. Notice, it is not a matter of exhorting an officer ethically to *make* his men's problems his own. Their problems simply are his, willy-nilly, and he is directly limited by their limitations, however he may pretend otherwise. This means, to put the matter much too tritely, that the wholeness of any man in authority is a matter of his personal relationships. It is not, at least not basically, a matter of his somehow being "true to himself," privately integrated and self-contained, a harmonious inner cosmos of body-mind-spirit or head-heart-hand, a man with a clear conscience, satisfied that he has done what he can. Any chivalric "officer's code" that suggests this is sentimental and a retreat from reality. An officer, for all the power supposedly at his command, is extremely susceptible to the others around him. He is, let us admit it, massively other-directed. In the countless exigencies of these other lives he is spread so thin and vulnerable that his own wholeness is not even

remotely a matter of his own control, much less a matter of his own character.

In taking this cue from the centurion, the implication is not that the officer's relationship to his own men is the only important relationship he has. His relationships are myriad. Sometimes, at least in his cynical moments, he may imagine he depends most precariously on his relationships to his superiors, or at least to the in-group of the officers' corps. Outsiders, especially religious critics who are generous with advice for the officer, assume that his most critical relationship ethically is with the enemy, or with the civilian constituency. Yet most officers, in candid self-reflection, would probably find that no one of all their complex personal relationships makes or breaks them as men, existentially, the way their relationship does to the men in their command. True, *The Armed Forces Officer* does say – mistakenly, I believe – that the officer “is loyal first to himself, for failing that, he fails in loyalty to all else” (p. 158). But the same manual redeems itself with the happy contradiction: “The officer who would make certain that the morale of his men will prove equal to every change cannot do better than concentrate his best efforts upon his *primary* military obligation – his duty to *them*” (p. 155, italics mine). Perhaps this one telltale feature of the Matthean centurion – namely, his officerly preoccupation with one of his men – is already enough to recommend him as a historically actual slice of life.

The centurion's concern was not merely to feel this or that toward his man, however dutifully, but rather to get his man taken care of. That is how far the personal relationship extends, all the way out to an accomplished result in the other man's physical condition. Short of that, the personal relationship fails. This needs saying because, in our stressing nowadays (and rightly) that persons differ from things, we are

apt to conclude that we can relate to persons personally and still fail them as things – as bodies for example, with itches and aching backs. We cannot. And often the best reminders that we cannot have come not from the theological texts but from writers like Hemingway and philosophers of science like Whitehead and the daily military police report. It was not enough for the centurion that he felt compassion. His compassion was worth nothing to him so long as his man lay dying. It was the same with his *exousia*. How powerful really is a commander's "Go" or "Come" or "Do this," however responsibly he utters it, unless it issues in his men's obedience? When his overtures to them, whether in command or compassion, fail to materialize in their response, the failure is his as much as theirs. Does he depend on them? Does he, indeed! See how internal the relations really are, and for whom the bell tolls.

In view of this, what officer would ever settle for so little power that he could not even order his dying man back to life? Ah, but that is a different question, and an absurd one – or is it? In any case, the sorry fact is that most every officer, like most every other man, does settle for such limited power, and maybe even counts it the better part of manliness to do so. For what could possibly be the alternative, except of course to command life and death, which is reserved to the Creator? After all, there does come a time when even a general has done all he can for his men, exhausting the world's best medical resources, instant communication systems, serum-flying jets, the army's unstinting humanitarianism, and a round-the-clock chaplaincy. Who could fault him for not doing more? Fault him, did we say? So, there is the dodge. Is it by pleading innocence, by taking refuge in a moral category, that the officer is suddenly absolved of his men's problems? But the protest comes back: he did all he could. Yes, and that is the point exactly. Doing all he could was all too little. He was inadequate to the situation,

just as his dying men are. Actually, these defeats need not be reserved for something so dramatic as death. What officer hasn't stood helplessly by as he loses a good man to something so prosaic as a broken marriage, a civilian job, or the mere passage of time? Hasn't the officer, then, himself been overpowered? Losing a man, as the centurion was about to do, to a ravaging disease is only a more dramatic instance of the same loss, which (and this is our point) is the officer's loss as well.

The officer might shrug it off. He might step outside and kick at a stone or head for the officers' club or swear at his executive officer. He might assume the stiff upper lip. He might at the military funeral bow, as we say, to the inevitable or to the Great Commander on high. But what responsible commander down here, knowing better than most men the limits of human and cosmic possibility, would be either irrational or impractical or immoral or blasphemous enough to appeal beyond those limits? Well, for one, the centurion at Capernaum appealed. It is a tribute to him that what most men would accept as an irreducible fact he had the audacity to perceive as a problem, his own as well as his servant's. But it was not even at that that Jesus "marveled." Nor was that what made the centurion whole.

4. AUTHORITY BIND

A second phase of the centurion's problem – in addition to the power failure he shared with his servant – is a problem of authority. The very thing he was under authority to do he was prevented from doing, and by that same authority. He was authorized to safeguard the life of his man. Yet that was now being refused him. And this refusal – that is, his servant's dying – was not an accident of nature or some blindly obstructive force in history but a Power whose authority, whose

ultimacy – let us say it, whose deity – the centurion knew all too well. At least Matthew knew it. In the Matthean Sermon on the Mount, which directly precedes this healing story, the Authority who commands men to preserve life and not to kill (5:21) is that same Authority by whom men are “cut down and thrown into the fire” (7:19). Indeed, the one reason for distinguishing here between power and authority is to emphasize that authority is power which is authorized. Without authorization power is what Burckhardt said it is, evil. But here in the face of this slave’s agony the centurion was, more than ever, “a man under authority.” His authority for rescuing his servant came from considerably higher up than his commander in the Capernaum garrison, or even from the Roman imperium. It came from the very top, where, alas, the same Authority also countermanded him in his servant’s dying. The only thing wrong with our calling this a “problem” of authority is our understatement.

To speak of *the* problem of authority, as we customarily do, conveys the optimistic impression that authority poses only one problem. Still, most of the authority problems that crowd under this conference’s subtheme, numerous and diverse as they are, do show a common analogy to the problem of the centurion. The subtitle on the program reads: “The Problem of Military Command Authority in a Liberal Constitutional State and in a Technical Age.” It is the question, in other words, of achieving military discipline in men without abridging their moral freedom and their initiative in technical decisions. Of course, the problem in just this form was hardly what troubled the centurion. What cramped his authority was not that his *doulos*, who was after all his chattel, enjoyed the guarantee of a “liberal constitutional state.” Indeed not. On the other hand, what does cramp officers today is that the orders they are under, both to maintain discipline and yet to insure their men’s freedom, come from one

and the same ultimate authority. At least they come from the same "liberal constitutional state." In the case of both demands, however conflicting, the authority is identical. For that common dilemma the centurion provides a paradigm.

It may seem that in the comparable dilemmas of today's officer the demands upon him are nowhere nearly as opposed as they were for the centurion. Still, whether or not that is the case, the real crux of the problem remains the same as it was for the centurion. The officer is under conflicting orders from the same stringent authority. But are his orders so opposed as all that? In fact, they are. In theory, perhaps not. Theoretically, the tension between his soldiers' obedience and their freedom seems soluble enough. A favorite solution nowadays, I gather from the manuals, is the harmonizing concept of "group responsibility." So conceived, there need be no antithesis theoretically between the decisions a soldier makes on his own and those he is given to obey so long as both sets of decisions are made out of "responsibility to the group." Notice the hypothetical "so long as." The manual I quoted earlier reduces the ideal to an easy formula: "Within our system, that discipline is nearest perfect which assures to the individual the greatest freedom of thought and action while at all times promoting his feeling of responsibility to the group." (P. 142)

Is it as simple as all that? It is only fair to add that, directly on the heels of this formula, the manual acknowledges the dilemma that arises in practice. On the one hand, the technological aspect of modern war requires of the average soldier not only more intelligence but also more initiative and self-confidence than before; on the other hand, the quick disaster that comes with high-velocity warfare requires closer communication and group cohesiveness than before – "at the same time that each individual is trained to initiate action for the common good." So, in retrospect, the formula looks more like a

wish than an accomplishment. Chester Barnard, whose *The Functions of the Executive* rates as a parallel manual for civilians, offers similar (though modest) relief for the tension: "Scarcely a man, I think, who has felt the annihilation of his personality in some organized system, has not also felt that the same system belonged to him because of his own free will he chose to make it so." That consolation, even if it succeeds in practice, is like those disenfranchised people who consoled themselves that they had abolished their popular vote by a plebiscite.

In his report to the Bundestag a few years ago the new Commissioner for the Armed Forces offered an indisputable solution to the same problem: only when the officers of the Bundeswehr advocate "out of inner conviction . . . our free, democratic government under law . . . will they acknowledge the rights of their subordinates as free men in the military as well and further the soldiers in their awareness as civilians." Whether the officers in today's *Bundeswehr* are in fact doing that for the soldiers' citizenship is not the question. The question is, Isn't there something the commissioner's sentence omits? What he omits is supplied elsewhere by a Bavarian captain on the basis of hard experience, quite unaware of the statement by the commissioner. Said the captain: "Citizens in uniform? – With all my heart, yes. But that presupposes the recruits being citizens when they reach us. The Bundeswehr has sufficient uniforms for citizens, but not enough citizens for these uniforms." The article that quoted the captain spoke to his point when it said: "The *Bundeswehr* must needs take on a job our present schools and parents almost invariably fail to do." But what the commissioner said (to return to his report) was: "Of course it must be recognized that the basic attitude towards these questions ought to be provided primarily by the *home* and the *school*." (Italics mine.) Notice the conflict. On the one

hand, the Bundeswehr dare not usurp the job of the home and the school. But the fact is, the job it has to do is the job of the home and the school. Still, in actual practice aren't both expectations, however conflicting, simply unavoidable and both on the same high authority?

These conflicts, which are easier in theory than in fact, collide within the person of the officer. Even the civilian "organized system" that Barnard described, if it is to "belong" to the members whose personalities it annihilates, requires that they feel they have chosen it. But to win that feeling from their personalities is still a "function of the executive." When *The Armed Forces Officer* solves the problem of the soldier's discipline by "promoting his feeling of responsibility toward the group," it would seem gratuitous to ask, Promoted by whom? But the answer is not the officer – that is, not yet, not until his responsibility has first been made more contradictory. First there is the reminder that "morale does not come of discipline, but discipline of morale" (p. 149). Then who is to inspire morale? Again the question is premature, for "morale comes of the mind and of the spirit" (p. 151). Yes, but from whose mind and spirit must the men's morale come? Why, ultimately from the officer's. "The moral level of his men is mainly according to the manner in which he expresses his personal force working with, and for, them" (p. 154). Then surely "his personal force" at least (assuming he has it) must be allowed to spring from his own "mind and spirit," spontaneously. Of course! Still, if he is supposed to be so spontaneous as all that, so personally motivated, surely he should not be coerced with threats and warnings. But then why is he warned that if he lacks that personal force he is doomed to professional failure and his men "will not respond to him" (p. 154)? The threat comes to him from that same authority which demands his moral spontaneity, and rightly so on both counts. On the one hand, as every Bundeswehr

officer knows from his remarkable new *Handbuch*, it is all a matter of his own "innere Führung." On the other hand, as the commissioner told the Bundestag: "Anyone who thinks he is in a position to evade the application of the principles concerning leadership doctrine is forced by superiors, comrades, and not least of all by subordinates – to whom the channel to the Commissioner for the Armed Forces is now open, in addition to the usual channel of complaint – to mend his ways." The officer still, like the centurion is in the middle, pressed from both sides by the same unimpeachable authority.

The dilemma the centurion faced, as we said, was not the modern officer's dilemma between his men's obedience and their freedom. There is another dilemma, however, which might very well have beset the centurion and which certainly besets the officer today: He must supply his men's needs, but he must also decline those needs which are not for him to supply. Yet, what if the need in question demands both courses from him at once, both to supply it and to decline it? Recall the centurion. So self-evident was his authority to help his servant that the mere statement of need – "My servant is lying paralyzed at home, in terrible distress" – did not even have to be translated from a statement into a request. Yet the way things were going made it no less clear that his was a need he was not authorized to meet. Neither horn of the dilemma would yield.

It might appear at first that the centurion's plight was exceptional since he had no choice in the matter. The truth is, the plight is worse for that officer who does have a choice. He has it almost daily. A man comes in requesting emergency leave and a "hop" back to the States. His need is plain to anyone with an ounce of human feeling: He needs to salvage his marriage, in person, but his ordinary leave is insufficient, and he does not have the fare. Still, the regulations governing emergency leave say No, and so must the officer: "You'll have to fall back on

letter writing, corporal, or on the Red Cross." If the man's wife were ill, that would be just cause, but in this case she is only unfaithful. After all, the military establishment is not a marriage clinic. It can supply everything from obstetrical services to Sunday school pamphlets to ski lodges and sometimes, in fact, even marriage clinics. Perhaps the corporal's request should have been justified on the military grounds, not to mention the humane grounds, of his morale. But there are some needs which the Army is not authorized to supply, for the army simply is not the whole of society. "I can't help you, corporal, but I wish I could" is really officer's shorthand for "I ought to help you and yet I ought not."

A well-publicized example of the same dilemma is the American military chaplaincy. Through its ministry every commanding officer must provide for the religious needs of his men. But this immediately poses two questions raised by the *United Presbyterian Report on the Military Chaplaincy*. "Is the state's motive in having military chaplains merely to boost troop morale and further the state's military effectiveness?" (I). If that is all the commander provides, he is simply not meeting his men's religious needs. But if he does more he risks the second question: "Is the state then establishing religion?" (IV). The *Report* observes: "While it would be a mistake to believe that the government's only motive in providing the chaplaincy is to fulfill the need of military personnel for the practice of religious liberty, it would be equally fallacious to think that the government's only motive is one of improving troop morale and, therefore, military efficiency" (V,2). Here again is a dilemma for the commanding officer. Not conscientious commander relegates the burden of this dilemma to his chaplain alone.

In elaborating the officer's dilemma as a man under authority there is no intention here of currying the audience's self-pity. That would be a *non sequitur*, which the centurion refutes. More

attractive than self-pity, perhaps, is cynicism, if not with a shrug then with a laugh, hilarious but hopeless. That, too, gets no encouragement from the centurion. Most attractive of all, both ethically and practically, is the illusion that the officer's dilemmas ought to be soft-pedaled lest they distract him from the day's work. Admittedly, distraction is a risk, especially if the officer who perceives the abject depth of his problem does not have (as the centurion did) the evangelical resource to overcome it. In that case there might just be utilitarian grounds for discouraging his truthfulness for the sake of his efficiency. In any case, the word for that is deception, and no one ought to pretend that an officer who is deceived about himself has any prospect of being a whole man. The centurion, on the other hand, was galvanized into the most extraordinary, most resourceful action directly in the face of a most shattering discovery. His discover: He was being disqualified from doing what he was under the strictest obligation to do. The one thing for which he had authority, namely, to be of service and to do good – without which presumably a man amounts to nothing – was being denied him by the very Authority who demanded his goodness. Nor is this circumstance unusual. That same Authority who assigns the day's work also apportions the day's time, and who ever gets enough time for his work? It is understandable that, in the face of this contradiction, men should by self-pity or cynicism despair of this Authority, or in order to avoid blasphemy should conceal the contradiction from themselves. But as we shall see in a moment, that Authority was not the one of whom the centurion despaired. True, the centurion's discovery of his own brokenness was not yet what made him whole, though he could never have been whole without that.

5. UNWORTHINESS

Comes now a third phase of the centurion's problem: a problem of merit. Though he declined to hide behind his autonomy and behind his authority, might he not at least have invoked his personal qualifications? Wouldn't some consideration have been in place on the grounds that he deserved it? Not that he should have been so brazen as to appeal to his Roman citizenship or his rank or even his record as a benevolent slaveholder. No, but might he not have done just what he did: confessed his own unworthiness and then counted on exactly that, that self-effacement, as his claim on Jesus' help? Of course, what the centurion did or did not feel would be hard for us to know. But it is a matter of record that it was not for his humility, not even for his penitence, that he was commended. To be sure, there are those sub-Christian "say you're sorry" soteriologies, both popular and refined, which exalt the penitent's confession into his saving virtue and thus refuse to take him at his word and thus minimize his need of Christ. There is none of that in this story. But then, if the centurion's repentance is not the secret of his success, it is all the more remarkable that it gets the play it does. The evangelist no doubt had reasons of his own, in view of his immediate readership, for contrasting this "beseeching" Gentile to an aloof Judaism. Nonetheless, the fact remains that the centurion's plea of unworthiness – "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof" – operates as a basic presupposition of every Christian's faith and a master clue to his problem.

If there were such a thing as a phenomenology of the military officer's unique religiousness, it would have to include, I believe, his humility syndrome. To a civilian observer at least, the impression persists that one of the most religiously significant phenomena in the modern military officer is his

habitual self-effacement, his minimizing the importance of his position. Nowadays it must be a tremendous temptation for him to be embarrassed by the unusual authority he bears. And though his embarrassment may seldom erupt into overt apologies, it might betray itself by the struggle he has to keep the embarrassment from showing – for example, in the tautly impersonal demeanor and voice and interoffice directives. Or it might appear in the frequent exhortations he gets from the officers' manuals to please wear his authority with confidence. Or he might be heard to remark, especially to civilians, that his soldiers after all are only civilians in uniform and that military command is not essentially different from ordinary personnel practice. Really, his burden is heavier than he lets on. A military officer, whatever else he is to his men, is also their magistrate. They are not, as they are in civilian employment, legally free to quit his organization in protest. He can make it virtually impossible for them even to get a transfer. The authority is extraordinary enough to make any man ill at ease who is entrusted with it.

But what is to be accomplished by this pervasive self-modesty? One can only guess. Perhaps by the officer's humility in the presence of so grave and corruptible a trust, assurance is given that he can be trusted to carry it. This selfless self-justification may explain why many officers are a curiously religious lot. Religious, of course, need not mean Christian or even devout. It may mean merely the strenuousness a man exerts for his own accountability, which a military officer has in rare measure. At least this seems a more plausible explanation of his religiousness than to blame it on his dangers in combat, which he faces only sometimes and in many cases never. Under pressure from all directions – from within himself but also from without, from below as well as above, suggesting that the pressure is more than human – to vindicate his right to his authority, he

might well seek to vindicate it by the paradoxical means of modesty. Maybe, as the saying goes, it takes one to know one. Surely a pastor knows this syndrome autobiographically. To have to speak God's Word for Him to mortals like oneself is a crushing authority. What preacher can utter the words, "Thus saith the Lord," without wanting to qualify them at every turn with "It seems to me" or "If I may suggest" –as though he were the one the people came to hear? Like the professional clergy, officers may find the separateness of the military profession to be an embarrassingly prestigious distinction – though both groups should take comfort from remembering that being set apart like this is probably less for prestige than for quarantine. But within the military profession itself there is, and no doubt has to be, a most elaborately defined system of merit. Being compassed about by so great a cloud of witnesses who write his efficiency reports, promote him or pass him over, count his years in grade, set great store by the difference between his silver leaf and his gold leaf, and only an officer knows what all, it would be too much to expect him not to be concerned with his unworthiness, if only as proof of his worthiness.

The manly alternative seemingly is to resist this whole concern for worthiness – in hopes, no doubt, that such resistance would be worthier still. That alternative, if it were possible, would be neither manly nor (what comes to the same thing) godly. Witness the centurion. His words ("Lord, I am not worthy") as well as his action ("beseeching") both acknowledge how godly the demand really is which calls a man to account and finds him wanting. But there is no question here of his using his modesty to extort the very favor he disclaimed the right to have. At this point he got exactly what he said he deserved. The Lord did stay away from his house. The Lord did not, by objecting, "Oh, but you are worthy," begrudge him his penitence and his exclusion from the covenant of Israel. On the other hand, lest

penitence be confused with bowing and scraping, this is not the case of an officer's apologizing for the authority he does have. On the contrary, the centurion confidently cites his authority as an analogy to what he expects from Jesus. In fact the authority he bears is ultimately what bears down upon him and leads him to confess that he is unworthy – not unworthy to bear that authority (he may or may not have been) but unworthy to appeal beyond it.

The wonder of the centurion's penitence increases as we recall the second phase of his problem, the clash within his conflicting authority: to have to save his servant and to have to let him die. Rather than fault that Authority in whose bind he is caught, the centurion finds fault in himself. By what possible logic? The logic is not so important as the fact of it, a fact repeated throughout the gospels in every broken sinner who sees past brokenness to judgment and refuses to let the judgment go to waste. What Bishop Lilje admired in our late Professor Tillich, "his seismographic competence," the centurion here exhibits in his own naively profound reading of what rocks the earth, "Lord, I am not worthy" suggesting that the faults and bucklings of the whole order of things, including the physical order, are imbedded in the *de profundis* of guilty, excluded man.

The centurion's plea of unworthiness illumines also the first phase of his problem, his sharing the servant's defeat as his own. He shared it not merely by sympathizing with it or even by doing something about it but by answering for it. Yet here we must be careful. It is not that the centurion blames himself for his servant's dying. That could be presumptuous. But he does accept blame for belonging to that order which disqualifies him from seeking aid for his servant. "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof." Surely that line must be a later editorial insertion, so unnatural is it for a man to interrupt a

mission of mercy with reflections on his own unworthiness. Not necessarily. His unworthiness is part of the problem. The Authority he is under, like the roof he is under, excludes him and his from all outside intervention for the reason that they are not entitled to it. Where that is the case, there is not recourse for the dying servant either. In confessing his unworthiness the centurion answers not only for his servant but for all the “men under orders” – under the old order. Even that, however, was not what made him whole.

6. CUTTING AND SEWING

Separating the centurion’s problem into three phases is artificial, obviously. Even more artificial, though perhaps not obviously, is separating his problem from his solution. No man recognizes his problem the way the centurion did without having some assurance, as he did, of its solution. Repentance, as the church relearned in the Reformation, is not *contritio* alone, the sinner’s being ground down under judgment, but it is simultaneously *fides*, his confident anticipation of rescue. The centurion’s unworthiness was only one of his reasons for discouraging Jesus’ entering his house. He had another, ulterior reason: “Only say the word, and my servant will be healed.” His contrition anticipated his faith. In each phase of our diagnosis, as the centurion obligingly stepped first through his autonomy and then his authority and then his merit, we were at pains to explain that none of this was what made him whole. That is so. But neither would any of this have been possible apart from what did make him whole. Still, who can say everything at once? You Frenchmen have a saying, as earthy as it is Gallic: Before one sews, one must cut.

7. THE SOLUTION

Although the centurion's solution is more quickly told than his problem was, that is not the most surprising thing about it. His solution was his faith, and that must have surprised the centurion himself. That is what made him whole. What is surprising about this tribute to his faith is that it in no way diminishes but only enhances the tribute to his Lord. For what a ridiculous faith it would have been – sincere, perhaps, but then merely pathetic – if Jesus had not been what the centurion believed. Conversely, because Jesus in fact justified the centurion's trust, what was great about his trust was what was great about his Lord. To be sure, that is not the whole story. Not only does faith follow fact. Fact also follows faith. "Be it done unto you as you have believed." But the prior injunction is: Believe as it has been done unto you. Actually, for the centurion this injunction never needed saying, since he had anticipated it. He believed what had already been done to him, that a new *Kyrios* with surpassing authority was there to help. Accordingly, the first marvel of the centurion's faith is what he in faith marveled at. Not even in Israel had Jesus "found such faith." Such faith as what? Such heartfelt, such unwavering, such concerned faith? No, that much Jesus had found in Israel. But the faith of the centurion was such as could say to Jesus (and who knows with what a struggle), "Lord" – and having said that, could add, "Only say the word, and my servant will be healed." "Such faith" depends entirely on whether Jesus really is Lord, that is, on whether He is a match for the centurion's authority bind and his unworthiness and his coenslavement.

How Jesus could break his authority bind, the centurion proposes in his homespun analogy. Just as the centurion has men under his authority who "go" and "do" as he commands, so this new *Kyrios*

must have authority to command the centurion to go and do what otherwise there is no authority for doing. The centurion's faith was not misplaced, as the sequel shows. Jesus does command him, "Go, be it done for you as you have believed." Be *what* done for you? Jesus has authority, but for what? In this case, to heal a paralyzed man. Is that all? No, not all. Actually the centurion's reference in Matthew 8 to authority fits midway between an earlier reference to it in the preceding chapter (7:29) and a later reference to it in the next chapter (9:6, 8). In the earlier reference the evangelist explains why Jesus' sermon "astonished" the audience: "For He taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes." Here "authority" might easily be mistaken for homiletical eloquence, as though the evangelist were contrasting the ring of authority in Jesus' preaching with the professorial droning of the scribes. But any reader of Matthew has to learn to wait and to enjoy suspense; the evangelist pays out his meanings one episode at a time. Accordingly, by the time the centurion comes along in chapter 8, it is clear enough that the authority Jesus has is for something more than the spellbinding of audiences. It heals paralytics. But that is still not the extent of it. The following chapter, however, finally plumbs the depths of what all Jesus' authority is for. Here again He uses it to heal a paralytic. But this time His act of healing is an explicit extension of a more fundamental authority. "The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins."

That is what the onlooking scribes called "blasphemy." If that was the authority the crowds had somehow found wanting in the scribes, no wonder. For that was authority the scribes would not presume to have: to forgive sin upon the earth, the earth which God so lawfully rules, fixing men in their responsibilities and judging them accordingly. Forgiveness in heaven, yes, where it makes no earthly difference to men who must still live out their

history under the Law and die under it. The scribes, like the centurion, appreciated better than many a Christian what a revolutionary authority it would take to upheave with forgiveness that godly law which governs planets and nations and centurions and polio. Not that the centurion knew all this. He knew only that Jesus had authority to break the impasse between the duty and the futility of a man who deserved both. Still, what else is that but the authority to forgive – on earth?

If Jesus' authority on earth to forgive sin is His counterpoise to the paralyzing authority under which the centurion stands, then by what worthiness of His own does Jesus counter the unworthiness of the centurion? In other words, what qualifications did Jesus have for His authority? He was the Son of God, comes back the automatic reply of Christian piety, and, after all, God can easily do anything He wants. Yes. But what is wrong with that answer is that by its theistic platitude it renders Jesus practically superfluous and leaves little need of His incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, or any of the rest. The far better answer, as Christian piety well knows, is the *Dignus est Agnus*, "worthy is the Lamb that was slain." It was for that, for His cross, that the Son was given a name above every name and authority over every authority. In response to the scribes' mumblings about blasphemy, Jesus asks ironically: "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'?" Easy, indeed! The irony is terrible. How easy was it really to get the paralytic's sins forgiven? As easy as dying. The reminder comes to mind from the Epistle to the Hebrews, "There is no forgiveness of sin without the shedding of blood." Also Matthew, taking his time as usual, finally at the dramatic moment divulges the full irony of the "easy" forgiveness of sin. At the Last Supper, as Jesus passes the chalice, He says: "This is . . . the covenant . . . for the forgiveness of sins." Ah, but we have omitted something. "This

is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." And you know what happened the next day. It is by that "easy" way that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sin and is worthy to trump the centurion's unworthiness.

What is Jesus' answer to that other phase of the centurion's problem, his co-enslavement with his suffering servant? The answer, in so many words, is provided not by Jesus but by an editorial comment of the evangelist. The healing story about the centurion's slave is one of a series of such stories, including a leper and a woman with fever, all of which is then finally explained in one sentence: "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases'" (8:17). The evangelist sees in Jesus, in other words, the Isaianic *'evedh Yahweh*, Himself the Suffering Servant of the Lord. He is the one who undertakes the coenslavement with every infirm and diseased sinner, but to good effect and with finality. Notice, the infirmities are not dispatched by the waving of a wand or the barking of an order. No, He "bore" them and "took" them. On this score the centurion, with his simple trust that Jesus need "only say the word," knew too little. Or perhaps, since the Suffering Servant this side of Easter and Pentecost does need "only say the word," the centurion spoke better than he knew. But "the word," then and now, could heal infirmities and diseases only because He who spoke that word "bore" them and "took" them, making them His own. This exchanging one man's lot for another's has scandalized many a man of good will to the point of outrage. But that is the mark of a reactionary, even though he may be up to date in everything else. Clinging to the old order, he insists on its categories – including its category, Every man for himself – also for the new order. What the Suffering Servant bore was not merely man's punishment. That would be a misrepresentation, not because it is

too crude but because it is too meager. What He bore, as His, was their sin and all that hangs with it. Their old selves needed replacing and, in suffering them, He suffered them out of existence and raised them up new men. Thus He fulfilled not only Isaiah but also the otherwise purposeless and unredeemed suffering of every paralyzed sinner by His fond coenslavement with them.

8. COLIBERATION

What was marvelous about the centurion's faith, however, was not only what it believed but also what it achieved. "Be it done for you as you have believed." Grammatically the sentence is in the passive, that is true. The centurion does come off as a beneficiary. But he is simultaneously an agent. He, too, is responsible for his servant's recovery. The solution to the centurion's problem is not only that his slave is healed but also that he himself is instrumental in the cure. That is (to recall the first phase of his problem), the centurion is still inseparably involved with his slave, though no longer to share his defeat but now to share in his liberation. The story could have been told differently, with the slave recovering independently of his master – say, by means of a good vaccine or by Jesus' action directly. That would have changed the story immensely. As the centurion responds to the "Go" of his new *Kyrios*, one more agent of the new order invades the old. And from now on all who become involved with this centurion are likely to have their world shaken and to be liberated from the most stubborn afflictions and to be launched into a history where things will never be the same.

9. TRANSWORTHINESS

No more unworthiness, either. Not that the centurion doesn't continue to be unworthy of his new prerogatives. He does, where the norms of the old order, worthiness and unworthiness, still need to be invoked. But in the new order those old categories simply do not apply. Not only is the Law fulfilled, it is dead. That is why our Lord can so freely lavish the centurion with commendation. Grave as the danger may be that Christians may smugly forget their unworthiness, even graver is the danger that they will be embarrassed by their exalted position on the irrelevant grounds that they do not deserve it. Then, in their embarrassment, they will minimize the new titles they bear, like "the sons of God." Much too conservatively, then, they will explain that they are God's "sons" only in the sense that they enjoy His fatherly love. Really, they have so much more. Already in their faith they embody the divine being. They are junior deities. In the Sacrament they banquet with the Trinity. Jesus describes the centurion, a new "son of the Kingdom" at table with the patriarchs – a kind of divine *Stammtisch*. And there is no mention of the centurion's protesting, "Aw, pshaw."

10. THE LOOSENING BIND

And as for the centurion's authority bind? Alas, he has now incurred still another bind in addition to the ones he already had. To the conflicting assignments of the old order, which he again takes up, he now brings a whole new conflict: the disruptively healing, forgiving lordship of the new *Kyrios*. Going back as the centurion did to his house and his command – where paralytics still suffered and where even the healed one eventually died, where centurions and commands and combat remained a sorry necessity, where the workday was still too short for the day's work, where the highest obligations

continued to be stymied by their own highest Authority – he was back amidst the authority binds of the old order. Not only was he in their midst but, what seems worse, he was once more in their service, actively contributing to their dilemmas: keeping his man a slave by keeping him well, keeping the peace by threat of force, etc. But he did go back, on orders. There is no suggestion that he should quit his command or hang up his sword. Of course, there was obvious authorization for him to go back. After all, the old order is also an order for good – for keeping slaves well and Capernaum peaceful – and that is what makes it a dilemma. But that much authorization any man has.

The centurion was not just any man, not since he had believed the *Kyrios*. He was a “son of the Kingdom.” This gave him new and militant authority for taking on the old order. He goes back under the same off-limits roof which he supposed a moment before the true “sons of the Kingdom” had to avoid. For what new mission was he authorized? Not just for doing the old order’s dirty work – yet always that too – but for undoing the old order, including those very features in it which it needs for its good work: its distinctions between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, centurions and enlisted men, allies and enemies, good men and bad. The centurion’s new authority is the authority on earth to forgive sins, to be exercised not in isolation by the Son of Man but also by his “men” (9:8), for binding and loosing in heaven and earth (18:18), “to the close of the age” (28:20). That is, the Christian – or better, the church – has the shared authority not just to forgive (as everyone has) but to forgive sin, and to do so on earth, where the forgiveness of sin makes real earthly difference to polio and slavery and warfare and time and the whole law-bound order of things.

There is no point in concealing the clash between the old order to which the centurion returned and the new order that he was

benevolently subverting. The one is openly at odds with the other. But the hottest sector of the struggle between them, in case any spy from the old order is out to reconnoiter, runs through the person of the centurion himself, where the faith is. That does put enemy intelligence at a disadvantage. Who hasn't wished, when faith seemed too high a price, that the same battle could be mapped and imitated instead by the obvious, administrable tactics of "Go" and "Come" and "Do this"? Just exactly how this centurion, who is authorized to kill men but who is simultaneously a "son of the Kingdom" authorized to restore them, succeeds in taking now this earthly beachhead and now that one from the old order is truly something of a mystery, to recall a New Testament word. But that mystery is part of the secret of his success. His gains elude the statistician, which is no small victory in itself. For that matter, just exactly how a one-time spa of the Roman warlords comes to be taken over, centuries later, as a Christian retreat center may (and may not) entail the same mystery. It is not as if the centurion's secret does not have its public side. It does, as public as a cross which sometime later his Jerusalem colleagues requisitioned from a quartermaster and confidently erected on a hill called The Skull. That *mysterion* is the holiest humor imaginable. All I can say is that, knowing what we do about this complete centurion and especially about his vast connections (but in that case we know all he knew), I would hate to be fighting on the other side and, if I had to be a soldier, I could follow him.

St. Louis, Mo.

[TheCompleteCenturion \(PDF\)](#)