

Hierarchy

Hierarchies are not well received in our culture. Egalitarianism and equality are regularly promoted. Dionysius, a sixth-century Syrian monk, apparently had a more positive view of hierarchy. I read a recent article by Hans Boersma, “Dionysian Power: A Positively Medieval Hierarchy,” in *Touchstone* journal, the March/April 2023 issue. He lifts up Dionysius’ view, and critiques modern egalitarianism. Here are Boersma’s main points:

I hope to show that the Dionysian hierarchy, which undergirded church and society in the Middle Ages, did indeed have the functioning of power at its center, but not the kind of power that violently imposes itself upon the disenfranchised and marginalized but the kind that lovingly lifts others into the being of God. . . . Put differently, within a hierarchical view of reality, power serves to lift up rather than to oppress, whereas within an egalitarian view of reality, power naturally oppresses people rather than lift them up.

But the most important difference between power in a traditional hierarchical system and power in egalitarian societies does not concern the question of where power is situated — whether throughout the hierarchies (including their mediating people and institutions) or only at the top (particularly among global elites). Sure, that is significant, but the greatest difference has to do with what we understand power to be.

Egalitarians construe power as a means of control. Power is a functional thing, after all; it is something we give to people who we think will get the job done. The result is that we link power with control, whether subtle or harsh. For Dionysius, and for the Christian tradition in his wake, power is an ontological thing; it is something rooted in the nature of reality. As a result, for Dionysius, power is mystagogical in character, facilitating the return of created beings to the Being of God. Modern egalitarians use power to oppress and put down; Dionysian mystics use it to hierarchize and lift up.

As I read the article, I thought of Jesus’ response when James and John request to sit at his side in his glory:

And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:41-45)

I have not read Dionysius’ works, but I have found Boersma to be a good writer and theologian. If he accurately summarizes Dionysius’ view of hierarchical reality, then the Syrian monk was on the right track. Jesus is the Son of God and Lord over all. If anyone should be at the top of a hierarchy, he should be the one. Yet he comes into creation as a man to “be slave of all.”

Imagine a hierarchy to be like a pyramid. For all their talk of equality, modern egalitarians build pyramids and place themselves on the point at the top. Boersma is correct. They are oppressors. The divine hierarchy embedded in creation is an upside down pyramid. Jesus is the single point at the bottom, upholding all of creation. “All things were made through him, and without him

was not any thing made that was made.” (John 1:3) Jesus is the slave who sets us free from sin, death and the devil. The Son and the Holy Spirit do indeed “lovingly lift us as believers into the “being of God.” Jesus is not an oppressor. He is the Savior of the world.