

2016

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Recommended Citation

Anderson, Paul, "Alternatives to Violence—Leadership and Truth" (2016). *Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies*. Paper 196.
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Alternatives to Violence—Leadership and Truth

Paul Anderson

Truth and Liberation, Chapter 4

Alternatives to Violence—Leadership and Truth

Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” (John 8:32) But what does that mean for you and me in terms of leadership. Ironically, when Jesus is presented on trial before Pontius Pilate in the Gospel of John, it is actually Pilate who ends up being judged in the story. While he claims to have the power to release Jesus or to put him to death, in the end it is he who is left begging the crowds to let him let Jesus go, and they refuse his request. Thus, he is presented as the impotent potentate. He has no power despite claiming prowess. So, what is the character of authority, power, influence, and leadership? Inevitably, these commodities relate to truth rather than force. When Pilate asks whether Jesus is a king, he responds that he is, but his kingdom is one of truth. That is why his disciples do not fight (John 18:36-37).

In this scenario at the end of John’s story of Jesus, issues of power, authority, and influence are presented in ways that challenge each other. The Greek word for power is *dunamis* (from which we get our word, “dynamite”), denoting the capacity to make a difference by one’s actions. The Greek word for authority is *exousia* (literally out of one’s being), which implies the capacity to make a difference by one’s personhood. In the confrontation of the Roman governor by the Galilean prophet, the authority of truth indeed confronts power in striking

ways. And, by the power of the resurrection, God's work has the final word in ways that command further authority.

Sometimes power is personal or institutional, in the ways that individuals or groups can cause things to happen by talent, ability, capacity, or strength—achieved realities. Sometimes authority is personal or institutional because of one's or a group's position, role, reputation, or structural responsibilities—asccribed realities. As power honors virtue and the truth, its authority ascends. As power is asserted in ways that are deceitful or treacherous, its authority descends. And, as individuals or groups uphold the moral authority of virtue, truth, and love, they amass authority in terms of influence. Conversely, as individuals or groups spend their authority in ways dishonoring the moral authority of virtue, truth, and love, the power of their influence is sacrificed, which diminishes their authority. It cannot be otherwise.

What we see in the exchange between Jesus and Pilate is that the relationships between the power and authority of individuals and institutions all hinge upon various features of truth. The power of the individuals relates to their strength and ability to wield influence over others. The authority of individuals relates to their reputations and respect garnered from others. The power of institutions relates to their capacities to compete among other institutions, taking or forfeiting territory within various fields of influence. The authority of institutions relates to respect and influence garnered by reputations and social contracts, wherein individuals grant sway to groups.

In ancient systems of governance, it was often might that prevailed in determining what was right. Might makes right, so the truism goes. The strongest warrior became the chieftain of the tribe; the strongest tribe wielded sway over other tribes; the mightiest city-state garnered influence over other city-states; the amalgamation of city-states into empires pushed sovereignty over other empires—often feeling the greatest conflicts at their borders. These were matters of power. In terms of authority, though, truth, artistry, and beauty held sway. The most knowledgeable, witty, and wise individual amassed influence among one's peers; the leadership such persons and their communities created advances in technology and industry; the sharing of knowledge and literature transferred

ideas across the boundaries of place and time; more enlightened and advanced cultures wielded sway over other traditions in the marketplace of ideas.

What we see in the exchange between Jesus and Pilate is that truth is compelling on both features of power and authority. While the stronger individual or group may defeat competitors physically, the capacity to influence in terms of authority cannot be furthered by domination. Rather, as a factor of conscience, genuine influence can only be furthered by truth. Again, there is no authority, save moral authority. Further, the authority of an individual or group can be wielded even if one loses a contest or dies physically. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, while Pilate can be seen to have exercised institutional power over Jesus, his having forfeited his life without committing violence—followed by his triumph over death, or even by his memory living on—shows that death was swallowed up in victory (1 Cor 15:54).

These dynamics play themselves out more fully in terms of the relations between truth and authority, truth and violence, and truth and leadership.

Truth and Authority

The establishment of authority in ancient cultures had mostly to do with prowess. As a tribe, city-state, or nation exerted its power over its competitors, it held sway by means of what Walter Wink^[1] describes as an ethos of domination. As one power sought to ascend in influence over others, being able to defeat the others militarily allowed the expansion of empire. Within an empire, centers of power wielded their influence as a means of garnering support and loyalty from conquered territories. Colonization allowed conquered groups to be sources of support for empires, wherein their goods and assets were taxed and used to support imperial clout. This system was leveraged by a fight-or-flight strategy. If a subject individual or group would resist, they would be decimated militarily. Therefore, the threat of force was used to intimidate and to garner support economically and societally.

The Babylonian story of how order in the world came to be exemplifies this myth. In the *Enuma Elish*, Marduk—the god of the Babylonians, creates dry land out the corpse of Tiamat—the water goddess held to be the mother of other gods. The implication is that order is created out of violence, and men establish order by subjugating women. The creation account of Genesis 1, however, shows that the

God of the Israelites created order by his very Word. By the divine Word light overcame darkness, land was raised up from the sea, vegetation and animal life were created, and humans were created in the divine image—male *and* female. And, after that final creative act, God said, “That’s *very* good.” Notice how the God of the Israelites challenges the myth of domination and the legitimization of violence. In biblical perspective, order is created not by violence or subjugation, but by the divine Word: God’s truth.

Within western history, as empires became more entrepreneurial, they began to wield influence aesthetically and intellectually, not simply militarily. The great advance, for instance of the Hellenistic (Greek) Empire, from the days of Alexander the Great and following, is that the beauty of classic architecture and sculpture, as well as the appeal of Greek language and literature, consolidated the larger Mediterranean world into a set of regions where commerce, trade, and culture could move from one region to the next with relative ease. And, common currency allowed businesses and markets to flourish, so that by the time the Roman Empire emerged, the Greek world was fairly well intact.

Into this world came the prophetic figures of John the Baptist and Jesus. John challenged the religious leaders for compromising the Jewish nation as a means of appeasing the occupiers while also selling out the people. John also challenged Herod for his affair with his brother’s wife, calling also for soldiers to be happy with their wages and to not take advantage of the populace. Soon after John’s ministry began, Jesus came onto the scene proclaiming that God’s reign transcends human governments and regimes. He defied religious regulations and healed people on the Sabbath. He cleared the temple of its moneychangers and its merchandise; God’s temple is a house of prayer, not marketing. Jesus dined with “sinners” even before they repented, and he redeemed the unclean—liberating the inwardly oppressed and healing those with physical ailments. Jesus extended God’s love and grace in ways that challenged societal norms, and in that sense, he spoke truth to power.

The Roman Empire, however, not only asserted its influence militarily, but it also sought to further its influence by means of co-opting local religions and cultures into a larger umbrella. Local religions were allowed, and even encouraged, but members of subject states were also expected to honor the Empire, and during

some administrations, people were expected to either confess Caesar as Lord and/or to offer sacrifices (at least incense) to Caesar. This was especially the case with Domitian (81-96 AD, although Caligula also insisted on such in 37-41 AD) and some of the emperors following his reign. Because Christians largely refused to worship Caesar, they were disparaged and sometimes persecuted, although extensive persecution was especially intense under Diocletian in the early fourth century.

Nonetheless, the price for embracing Christ alone as Lord was steep for many believers during the reigns of Nero (54-68 AD) and Domitian (81-96 AD), and even into the reign of Trajan (98-117 AD) and beyond. Opposition to Empire is especially palpable in the book of Revelation, where the Lord God is envisioned on the throne—a highly political statement (Rev 4). The last verse in 1 John 5 sums up the domination-challenging ethos of the whole letter: “Little children, stay away from idols!” (v. 21), and whereas Domitian required his servants to reference him as “Lord and God,” this is the counter-imperial declaration of Thomas regarding Jesus at the end of John’s Gospel: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28) These are some of the associations that would have been felt by John’s audiences in displaying the truth-deprived Pilate before the truth-affirming Jesus in John 18-19.

For the next two centuries, followers of Jesus challenged the ways of the world at work within the Roman Empire. They opposed drunken festivals, where celebrations of the Emperor’s birthday were yoked to local traditions as a means of securing imperial support. They opposed gladiator battles for entertainment, where warrior-slaves, former soldiers, and sometimes even fighting women maimed and killed each other for the perverse entertainment of the masses. For nearly three centuries, Christians were nearly unanimous in their opposition to war and violence, but the character of the movement changed as a factor of its greatest “success.” With the conversion of Constantine in 312 AD and the Edict of Milan the following year, Christianity became legal, and in 380 AD Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Theodosius. The question is whether these changes distorted the movement away from following the nonviolent and peaceable way of Jesus in ways to which Christ himself would have objected.

Of course, with the movement toward Christianity becoming the official religion of the now “Holy” Roman Empire, the relation between the truth upheld by followers of Jesus—willing to suffer and die for their faith—and the power of the state was altered. Before Constantine marched his troops into the water and declared them baptized, now a “Christian” army, followers of Jesus had been largely committed to nonviolence and resisted military service. Some even were willing to suffer persecution and death rather than deny their faith at the hands of the Romans. Therefore, Christian witness to their understanding of the truth took a number of turns when Christianity now became the religion of the Empire instead of a witness to the Empire, and that tension continues to this day. Thus, the witness of truth to power shifted as Christian authority was seen to be conveyed by the state and the established church rather than testifying to or against leaders and institutions on behalf of the faithful.

During the reign of “the Holy Roman Empire,” however, much of the truth attested by Jesus and his followers was sacrificed in the name of bolstering the authority of institutions. Instead of followers of Jesus standing against the wielding of power, the divine rule of kings and queens was legitimated by the citing of Romans 13:1-7, where Paul admonishes believers to obey the authorities because they were instituted by God. Therefore, upholding adherence to state policies and officially correct Christian doctrine became the measure of truth, and dissidents were disparaged and even persecuted by the Christian state. Authority was therefore exerted by the power of force, and it was not until the Reformation, when the authority of Scripture’s truth was asserted that the truth of Christ as revealed in Scripture was asserted as a challenge to church doctrine, and the following developments coincided with the Scientific Revolution.

Another set of movements, though, heralded the Christian priority of following Jesus above all else. For over a thousand years, various Catholic orders and movements committed themselves to excluding violence from problem-solving options. Note the amazing examples of the Benedictine Trappists and the Franciscans, and the more recent Catholic Worker Movement founded by Dorothy Day, for instance. Following the wars between Christian bodies in the Reformation, though, several peace movements developed among believers. In the 16th century, Menno Simons declared that a true member of Christ’s kingdom cannot also be enslaved to worldly kingdoms. Therefore, the Mennonite

movement, from Netherlands to Switzerland, called for following the way of Christ over and against political spheres. The following century, George Fox and the early Quakers opposed violence and even wrote a letter to King Charles II in 1660 testifying that the Spirit of Christ would never lead them to use violent means to peaceable ends. And, in the 18th century, a number of Brethren groups emerged, especially from the Pietist movements of southern Germany, believing that one's baptism should be a testimony of one's commitment to following the peaceable way of Christ. The Anabaptist movement and other dissenting groups were welcomed to Pennsylvania by William Penn and other Quaker leaders as a "Holy Experiment"—seeking to create a new society after the way of Christ—not needing a standing army or a military presence. Things changed, though, with the onset of the French-Indian and Revolutionary Wars.

Following the end of the Thirty-Years War in 1648, the thoughtful leaders of Europe and beyond sought to find reason-based alternatives to religion-based contests. It was also at this time that the forces of Cromwell in England defeated the armies of Charles I, and he was beheaded thereafter. With the launching of the Quaker movement in 1652, the emphasis that the truth of Christ was available to all became the sounding blast of the democratic ideal. The age of reason thus began to replace the political authority of religion, and Robert Barclay's *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (1676 in Latin; 1678 in English) piqued the imagination of Europe's intelligentsia. Barclay's appeals for the privileging of conscience and its liberties were especially significant in creating a new era of freedom and civil liberties. As Friends and others stood for the truth in government, business, industry, and society, a new age emerged characterized as modernism, where truth is prioritized in service to progress.

With the Scottish Enlightenment and other movements leading to the rise of the age of science, authority shifted from institutional prerogatives to demonstrated bases of validation. In other words, what is deemed to be true must be verified by the five senses. Thus, "facts" can be distinguished from assertions, and evidence can be attested or disconfirmed by others. Hypotheses verified and replicated in other settings and by alternative means of experimentation allow determinations of truth can be ascertained and embraced by all, not just the privileged few. As a result, the "common sense" of majorities led to a new era of truth seeking and

truth affirming, whereby adherence to the truth has become the highest value in western society.

Of course, compromises in the seeking and adhering to truth are also legion, especially when such becomes costly. Nonetheless, following the lead of William Penn's Charter and those of other colonies the American contribution to democratic advances was considerable. Especially with the Pennsylvania-based insights of John Dickenson and others, Quakers indirectly made a major impact on the American Bill of Rights. Freedom of religion (not just toleration) became the norm, women were seen as equals to men, and slaves were embraced as humans, although the abolition of slavery did not follow until nearly a century later. Believing that all had access to God's truth (John 1:9), the divine right of kings and the violent succession of regimes were replaced by a peaceable process privileging the will of the majority. With the rise of democracy, the divine will for nations was thus seen to be conveyed not simply by an appointed magistrate, but it may be better ascertained by the common sense of society.

Both of these advances show how truth in the modern era has become the primary source of authority, and individuals and institutions alike are held to be authoritative to the degree to which they embrace and advance the truth. For individuals, upholding the truth becomes the basis for their personal and professional authority; that is what makes them an expert. And, within institutions, authority is a function of responsibility. When one is asked to perform a task, they must be given the authority to carry it out. In these ways, truth and authority go hand in hand. There is no authority without truth, and the greatest authority is moral authority, whence individuals and institutions alike have command influence.

Truth and Violence

Notice that Jesus commands his disciples to put away the sword (Matt 26:52; John 18:11), and in John 18:36 he emphasizes that his disciples do not fight because his kingdom is not of this world. This statement, however, is not saying that the reign of Jesus is simply pie in the sky. It does have a huge impact in worldly affairs and endeavors precisely because its origin is not worldly; its origin is from above. Christ's kingdom is one of truth, and as such, it inevitably scandalizes the abuse of power and the leveraging of authority. And, if truth is

one's priority, truth can never be furthered through force or violence. It is always a factor of conviction rather than coercion.

Again, within the modern era, the authority of truth has held compelling sway. The very authority of good science is that it shows the truth about things in ways that can be verified by all. Science has thus been liberating in terms of discovery and advances in technology. Likewise, academia has upheld the promise that only compelling ideas and theories should be embraced within disciplines. Therefore, academic authority is not rooted in prowess or popularity; it is rooted in research and the demonstration or disconfirmation of tested hypotheses. At least, that's the way academics should work, in theory, and the degree to which academicians seek, discern, and uphold the truth determines the authority of the scholar, the methodology, and the field. Then again, academic approaches to truth can also be partisan, rhetorical, and vested in terms of interest, so the truth-seeking work of the academician must ever be maintained as the first priority in the venture. If not, academe itself forfeits its hard-won authority.

The use of force or enticements, however, distorts the quest for truth. In the presence of threats, worthy insights go underground; in presence of bribes, non-compelling tenets get propounded. Even between individuals and groups, let alone between nations, agreements that are established on the basis of mutuality and respect do much better in the long run than those that are leveraged by force. And, in the inculcation of values, believing a notion is true leads to a far more enduring embrace than simply being forced to acquiesce to someone else's conviction. Therefore, the reign of truth can never succeed as a factor of violence or force. This is why Jesus' followers cannot use force to further his way; it is not a matter of permission—it may not be done; it is a function of possibility—it cannot be done. In upholding the truth, that elevation itself is what draws people to it, and if the truth as purported is not compelling to others, it might not fittingly represent the actual truth.

Truth and Leadership

Given that truth alone is compelling, and that authority is ever a function of truth, authentic leadership will always be a function of not only articulating and upholding the truth; it will also involve facilitating the discovery and embracing of truth by others. There is no such thing as an effective solitary venture; all genuine

advances involve corporate endeavors in which people move together with a common mission and set of goals. Put otherwise, without followers, or at least companions in the venture, leadership itself is a questionable commodity. And yet, the most compelling and robust examples of leadership are those in which a great number of people are inspired to move and work in a common direction toward a jointly owned mission. When that happens, and when it happens effectively, that is normally the mark of good leadership.

But how do leaders lead well, and what is the place of truth within enterprises of effective leadership? One might argue that authentic and effective leadership inevitably hinges not upon exhorting others to follow a leader, but it is founded upon one's capacity to help people ask the right questions, to analyze problems effectively, and to discern ways forward together, leading to corporate ownership and enthusiastic implementation in unity. When that happens, that's good leadership! Therefore, the first charge of the effective leader is not to bark orders down from the top, commanding people to fall in line and to carry out mandates. People might go along for a while, but if they are neither convinced of the mission nor embracing its basis, they will most likely not follow through with long-term support of the agenda. After all, the cultivation of understanding, analytical embrace, and ownership requires convictions that something is worth doing and that it is the best way forward in the accomplishment of a shared goal or mission. Embracing the truth on a particular matter is thus essential for effective leadership.

Further, leaders do not possess all the knowledge needed for good decisions to be made. They need the input of those who have their ears to the ground and who are working on particulars of the whole; receiving that input is the only way individuals and groups can get a sense of the issues, and that is the only way problems can be understood and solved. Many a poor decision has been made because input was not gathered from all sides, or because some of the information was faulty. When a leader, though, effectively gathers inventory of the multiplicity of issues at hand, the best ways forward can more readily be discerned and carried out. This may take more time, but it is not less efficient. If the efficiency measure is not simply taken as noting how quickly a decision was made, but extends also from earlier problem identification to later

implementation, decisions made in unity and consensus are far more efficient as well as effective.

Therefore, the effective (and efficient!) leader is primarily as successful as he or she is able to facilitate individuals and groups attending, discerning, and embracing the truth. In mundane perspective, this involves getting measurements, facts, information, and knowledge right to begin with, and then moving on toward analysis and serviceable ways forward. In the spiritual sense, this involves considering the values at stake and the relationships involved, and then moving on toward discerning the best ways to further the mission at hand. All of these skills and endeavors involve the quest and embrace of truth, and if all truth is God's truth, it will be welcomed from whichever quarter it hails.

In these and other ways, truth is central to effective leadership, and the discerning and embracing of truth is what genuine leaders seek to effect for individuals and groups. With Nathan, Plato, Jesus, Gandhi, and King, sometimes truth speaks to power in ways that challenge the intransigence of tradition and sometimes even the use of force. And, with prophetic, scientific, democratic, and academic traditions, institutions and trajectories are challenged in the name of truth. Therefore, in the contest between Jesus and Pilate, Pilate's disparaging of the truth ("What is truth?") not only confesses his lack of access to the truth, but it also exposes his impoverished authority. After all, the enduring and transcending kingdom is one of truth, and that is why it cannot be furthered by leverage, violence, or force.

Indeed, alternatives to violence are always worthy considerations. As the 19-year-old Quaker martyr, James Parnell said just a few weeks before he died, "Be willing that self shall suffer for truth, and not the truth for self."

[1] Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).