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“TRUTH, POWER, AND CHRIST”

PAUL ANDERSON

Speaking truth to power makes a difference because the source of political power and personal authority will ever be a function of truth; likewise, empowering the truth makes a difference because the truth is always liberating. While the relations of truth and power are profitably developed in non-religious terms, they also engage powerfully when examined through the lens of the saving-revealing work of Christ. That reality, however, deserves also to be considered as a spiritual reality, rather than an overtly religious one, and such is the heart of the Quaker worldview.

Can Christ, though, be approached in a spiritual-yet-non-religious way? Yes and no. Not if one takes the meaning of “religious” in the general sense—having to do with spiritual life and religious faith and practice, such as denoted by the “Religious” Society of Friends. The aspect of “religious” addressed here is contrasted to the work of the eternal Christ as one of *revelation*—coming to humanity as the divine initiative, challenging all that is of human initiative and origin—in other words, the creature-made forms and structures of conventional religion. These indeed were the very platforms and scaffoldings that Jesus challenged in the Palestine of his day, and if he confronted such within Judaism as a Jewish prophet, he would undoubtedly do the same among Christians and Quakers today in that same prophetic vein. Likewise other religions, and atheism, and fundamentalism, and secularism, as well, in that they are constructs and platforms of creaturely origin—yes, even religious anthropology and my beloved Quakerism, proper!

Like the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus, to come to Christ is *not* simply a turning from sin and transgression to God. Paul’s burden was not the sin of rebellion or debauchery; rather, it was his invested *religiosity*! Conversion thus involves turning from false idols to the saving-revealing initiative of God—which Jesus as the Christ eschatologically was and is—and also turning one’s back upon the idolatry of security of religious certainty. This involves setting one’s sails to the wind of the Spirit, which blows whence one cannot see and leads whither one cannot anticipate (Jn. 3:3-8).

Unless one is born “from above” one cannot see or envision the Kingdom of God; *that* is the meaning of truly being “born again.”

As a spiritual quest, however, the path Friends have chosen is not an amorphous one dictated by one’s subjective whims and inclinations. No. The God who moves in the present has acted in history as well, and the work of the eternal Christ is manifested among humanity, punctuating epochs of time through the historic work of Jesus as the Christ. Further, it is through his Spirit that later generations are led into truth and thereby empowered. This is what it means to encounter the same reality as Fox and historic Quakers discovered: that Christ is come to teach his people himself. No intermediary is needed—Christ, through the Holy Spirit provides all that is needed to abide in the truth and to thereby change the world.

Truth is always liberating; Jesus said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” (Jn. 8:32) When we see the truth about ourselves—both our value and our shortcomings, we come closer to health and wholeness—emotionally, mentally, and physically. The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin *and* of righteousness (Jn. 16:8-11), which means that we have neither to prop ourselves up nor to put ourselves down. We can rest in the truth of divine grace and the grace of divine truth. Responding to the truth about ourselves in faithful awareness of our dependence on God’s provision and initiative makes one a “convinced” Friend—essentially a faithful response to the truth. Put simply, saying “yes” to God’s loving YES to humanity leads to a grateful reception of what God has done on our behalf through the work of Christ then and now. And that work continues, connecting past and future together in the momentous present.

In terms of worship, to worship in Spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:21-24) involves opening oneself to the divine presence and power of God, independent of place and form. Neither in Jerusalem nor in Samaria, nor as delimited to any other human setting, is transforming worship effected. Rather, wherever the believer opens her or his heart to the living God authentically—there God’s love is encountered and bestowed. Authenticity in worship is ever a function of truth, and after such persons the heavenly Father is actively at work, seeking to draw all who are open into transforming experiences of worship. In terms of ministry, effective ministry happens not as a function of religious office or status, but as a function of loving service and inspired empowerment. Again, the spiritual reality of God’s power and presence is what people convey to the world on God’s behalf, and the heart of this reality—in truth—is love (Jn. 13:35).

Ironically, the world in its clinging to power claims to possess the truth, but in reality it does not. Politically, the only authority possessed by rulers is that which is given from on high (Jn. 19:11), but such can never be a mere factor of human force or political might. Jesus' reign is one of truth, and this is why his disciples cannot fight—it can only be furthered by revelation, not by force. To deny or betray the truth is to set back the Kingdom, for it is centrally founded on the advance of truth (Jn. 18:36-37). Pilate, who knew not the truth, exposed himself as “the impotent potentate,” claiming all power in one breath and begging the crowd to let him let Jesus go in the next (Jn. 18:38-19:22). Likewise, the religious authorities were scandalized by Jesus as the Revealer, as he claimed to speak not only “about” God, but from and on behalf of God. Truth is always an affront to human claims to authority because essential truth is essential power.

Christ thus empowers the truth by challenging us personally and societally. As light extinguishes darkness, the Light of Christ enlightens all humanity (Jn. 1:9), at least potentially, but human responses to the Light are varied. To those who receive it—despite its convicting and penetrating work—they are empowered to become the children of God (Jn. 1:1-5, 10-13). Some, however, evade the Light, clinging to the false comfort of darkness, lest it be exposed that the basis of their lives is of creaturely origin rather than divine (Jn. 3:17-21). As the Revealer, Christ challenges the religious sensibilities and constructs of humanity precisely because they are religious constructs. To receive grace and truth from beyond is to close the door on the sufficiency of human religious attainments; this is why Christ will always be an affront and a scandal to the world. To say yes to the revelation is to contextualize our creaturely footings and to admit the contingency of our contrived foundations.

What Christ ultimately reveals to humanity is that we are beloved of God despite our undeservedness and shortfalls. That is good news indeed, but it cannot be conjectured or imagined on its own. Because it is so counter-conventional, so antithetical to human notionalities, it can only be apprehended by means of revelation. Therefore, it is not because of a divine requirement that Christ is “the way, the truth and the life,” through whom all who come to the Father do so (Jn. 14:6), as though the Gospel were a divine regulation from on high. Rather, it is a factor of human incapacity to come to God on our own that the divine initiative is required. The operative verb here is not “may” but “can.” “No one *can* come” to the Revealer except being “drawn by the Father” (Jn. 6:44, 65), and this is because no one has ever seen

God (Jn. 1:18; 5:37; 6:46). Christ, however, discloses the Father to humanity (Jn. 1:14; 14:7-9), inviting a receptive response to the eternal Source of divine love. The Revealer thus scandalizes all that is of worldly origin, including religion, and this explains his offense.

Like Plato's Allegory of the Cave in Book 7 of *The Republic*, the man who breaks out of the chains becomes a threat to those who remain fixed upon the dancing shadows on the wall. They have grown comfortable with the projected shadows in front of them, and have even waxed proud of their abilities to predict their movements and patterns. The liberated one, however, casts off his chains, notes the dancing fire behind them and its projected shadows, exits the cave, sees the light of the sun, and returns to tell the others the “good news” of the truth. Rather than welcome the truth and its liberating power, however, those who are chained prefer the security of their captivity to the devastating impact of the truth. Therefore, they kill the man so that they can once more congratulate themselves on their speculations, having limited their known world to the shadows dancing in front of them. They thus reject liberation in exchange for bondage, and so it is with those who prefer the trappings of political, religious, intellectual, economic, societal, and personal power over the liberating work of the Revealer. Because he empowers the truth, the witness to the light becomes a threat to those fixed upon shadows; their resistance, though, becomes a further invitation for other witnesses to speak truth to power.

As the way, the truth, and the life, Christ both speaks truth to power and empowers the truth. The Revealer challenges religious and political claims to authority, pointing instead to God, who is the Source of all of life. Personally, as the saving-revealing initiative of God, the Light of Christ sets us free from our darkness. His Spirit convicts us of the truth about ourselves and the world, inviting a transforming response of faith. When that happens, we see even our enemies as beloved of God, calling for a like response to the grace and love we ourselves have received from beyond. In these and in other ways, truth leads to power, calling us to empower the truth, and both of these ventures are furthered by the spiritual and revelational work of Christ. To know the truth is to be liberated by it. In that sense, truth and power find their essential connection in non-religious-yet-spiritual work of Christ.