

Whose Truth Are You Living? By What Authority?

Matthew 7: 18-29; Luke 19: 45-20:8

Richard A. Rhem
Lakeshore Interfaith Community, Mothers' Trust
Ganges, Michigan
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I invite you to think with me about a subject that has fascinated me, even tortured me for years, indeed from youth. I was an old young man. Warped from the womb. I had been dedicated to the service of God by my father while still safe in my mother's womb. I learned that on the day of my ordination in a letter from my father. I was a serious and thoughtful youth. Nurtured in the faith, solidly traditional, I wondered about the Christian faith – I believed it with heart and soul, but early on I worried that maybe it might be swallowed up by unbelief. Would there be a church to serve when I came of age? I did not really savor my years of education – my studies were for the purpose of being a minister – I endured the seven years of college and seminary so that finally I could get on with ministry.

I never experienced normal adolescent doubt, nor one day of rebellion against authority, parental or otherwise. I came out of college and seminary with the faith with which I entered intact. I was a very conservative Dutch Reformed Calvinist. My first congregation, First Reformed of Spring Lake, was a great call but I was a bit threatened because the tenor of the congregation was more liberal than I was. During the third year there, the Reformed Church, in collaboration with the Presbyterian Church, brought out a new church school curriculum for children through adults. It was called "The Covenant Life Curriculum". I studied the Foundation papers and taught an introductory course to an adult group. It was a bit challenging. Both the foundation papers and the introductory course dealt with the view of Scripture that informed the curriculum.

About that same time the Reformed Church, through, I believe, its theological commission, wrote a report on Biblical authority. I remember so well debating the report on the floor of the Muskegon Classis. I was wary of the report. The phrase that troubled me was that "Scripture was infallible in all that it intends to teach." The qualification "intends to teach" was saying, for example, that Scripture did not intend to teach a scientific account of creation, something that seems so obvious to me now. However at the time I saw that phrase as giving wiggle room to those who want to evade Scriptural authority. In those dark ages of my development I wanted an "infallible and inerrant" Scripture.

In retrospect, I realize how large loomed the issue of authority for me – guaranteeing absolute truth. I wanted a thoroughly authoritative Word of God as the only guide for faith and practice. Again, in retrospect I realize that that need arose from a deep-seated insecurity within me. I was very defensive against any crack in the armor of biblical authority because the Bible was the Word of God on which I posited my whole ministry. From my present understanding, I can see that my faith, my message, what I felt charged to proclaim was not really an assured inward experience to share but a creedal, confessional system on which I had placed my whole life and ministry. I was dead serious about it. I believed with my whole being that at issue were heaven and hell, salvation and damnation.

I shouldn't be too hard on myself as though this were a system of belief external to my own spiritual life. I had from childhood through youth and into adulthood a meaningful piety. My experience was deep and personal but, I now realize, I relied on the external prop of a system of absolute truth rooted in an infallible and inerrant Holy Book and, interestingly, I was intelligent enough to know what I needed – a solid foundation on which to base my own spiritual life and my ministry– was not without some weak links in the system.

About the same time I was debating Scriptural authority on the floor of classis and being introduced to a more progressive, or liberal view of Scripture (even though the Covenant Life Curriculum was still very mainstream conservative), I encountered a pastoral situation that shook me. Being a young pastor, I had much to do with our young people. I took them to a Bible Conference for Youth for Christ week. We bonded tightly. I loved those kids. One young lady attended Sunday School and youth groups whose parents did not attend the services and were not members of the congregation. She was one of a whole group who made her confession of faith. The next summer she went away with a friend to work in a motel with her friend's mother. The mother was a Mormon. My dear young person came home, confused and eventually embraced the Mormon faith. I dealt with her as best I could. I gave her biblical texts. Her friend's mother gave her texts from the Book of Mormon. I lost that struggle and was heart-broken.

Strange as it may seem, that seemingly rather minor pastoral event was an epiphany for me. I, who had argued for an infallible, inerrant Word of God met my match when my dear young person met my book with her new-found book. I'm sure there were many dynamics that impinged on her decision but what I had to face up to squarely was that, if I only had a text, a rival text could neutralize it or overcome it.

Put that pastoral crisis together with a fresh probing of biblical authority and I was on the way to a whole new understanding of authority in Christian experience. A long arduous journey lay ahead of me. After a year I left Spring Lake for a very conservative congregation in New Jersey where I introduced the Covenant of Life Curriculum, which met strong opposition from some of the leadership. After three years I realized I would have to dedicate years to bringing

that congregation around – and it could have been done – or leave to fulfill a desire I had when I graduated from seminary – to continue my studies in Europe. I decided to go on to post-graduate study and was most fortunate to be accepted at the University of Leiden and Professor Dr. Hendrikus Berkhof who became my mentor.

How well I remember those years. Berkhof was a marvelous teacher. I would formulate my questions in preparation for meeting with him. I really wanted answers but he would respond to my questions with “Ja, Ja, that is the question.” I knew that was the question but I wanted the answer. Instead he left me twisting in the wind because he knew the critical issue was learning the questions, not finding the answers because in these matters of religious probing and spiritual inquiry there were no simple and easy answers. Here we are not dealing with the hard data of the natural sciences but with the probing of the spirit – or the Spirit. In this arena one must give up on easy answers, hard data, realizing one is on a journey, engaged in a quest which takes one beyond the limits of proof and verification.

For four years I read and read and read, and I struggled to catch up on the education I had never received, in large part because I was not open to new insight and growth. But now I was. I was not at all certain I would have a message to preach when once this oasis of in-depth inquiry were concluded. But I had come finally to a place where I wanted to follow the inquiry with integrity wherever it led me. For me, for anyone, that is revolutionary – the threshold of open and honest inquiry.

I was beginning to see how my narrow and constricted view of biblical authority kept me from an honest encounter with the larger questions of faith and life. I saw how concrete issues in the church could not be handled with the view of Scripture I had brought to my ministry. One such issue at the time was the ordination of women. I began to see how the culture of biblical times could not be simply transposed into the present and that the Scripture bore all the marks of its culture of origin. On one occasion I said to Professor Berkhof that I should write a dissertation on biblical authority in terms of my growing understanding in order to deal fruitfully with issues such as the ordination of women. He smiled and said, “Do you know what they will do to you?” He understood well how institutional religion works. And I was beginning to understand the tension between what one holds as authoritative, the source of authority – be it a sacred book or an institution, a religious community culture or tight tribal pattern, and what one senses is true and right and good in one’s own depths.

All tribes, cultures, institutions evolve over time but most often at a snail’s pace and change that results is often the consequence of social upheaval that creates a crisis forcing new postures and positions on the relevant issues or views involved. And often there is some catalytic agent, some charismatic leader that creates the

focus and forces the change. For example, a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King. Or – Jesus!

This process which happens in the broader culture in all areas of human endeavor – religion, politics, economics, social theory – and our personal response is the phenomenon on which I invite you to think with me. Thus my title: “Whose Truth are You Living? By What Authority?” and my expansion of that title:

We are shaped and formed as individuals and communities, shaped and formed by parents, teachers, pastors, political leaders, cultural icons. Much of our lives we live on “borrowed truth”, “truth” declared by our “tribe,” perhaps a holy book, a religious tradition and its institutional form – maybe even by a claim of rational absolutes or the claim only reason can determine truth. That being the case, how does one come to one’s own truth? How does one emerge from one’s “dogmatic slumbers?” Have you? Or would you rather not?....There is more than enough to keep us wondering together for a hour.

I had just written the chronicle of my own struggle to find my own truth, my own voice, when I received Thursday’s blog from *Tomdispatch* that comes several times a week. I don’t always read it but the one whose work was featured Thursday was Andrew Bacevich. I have read a couple of his books and find he speaks to me. Andrew Bacevich is a professor of history and international relations at Boston University. A brief bio from *Wikipedia* records:

Bacevich graduated from West Point in 1969 and served in the United States Army during the Vietnam War, serving in Vietnam from the summer of 1970 to the summer of 1971. Later he held posts in Germany, including the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, the United States, and the Persian Gulf up to his retirement from the service with the rank of Colonel in the early 1990’s. He holds a Ph.D. in American Diplomatic History from Princeton University, and taught at West Point and Johns Hopkins University prior to joining the faculty at Boston University in 1998.

On May 13, 2007, Bacevich’s son, 1 Lt Andrew J. Bacevich, Jr., was killed in action in Iraq by an improvised explosive device south of Samarra in Salah ad Din Governorate. The younger Bacevich, 27, was a First Lieutenant in the U.S. Army, assigned to the 3rd Battalion, 8th U.S. Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division.

The *Tomdispatch* blog was the introduction to Bacevich’s latest work, *Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent War* (Metropolitan Books). As I read Andrew Bacevich’s account of his evolution, it was haunting; it was very similar to what I had just written about myself. He writes, “My own education did not commence until I had reached middle age.” It happened for him at the

Brandenburg Gate in Berlin soon after the Wall had fallen. Without going into detail here, let me just cite his own description of what was going on within him.

Huddling among the scarred columns, those peddlers – almost certainly off-duty Russian soldiers awaiting redeployment home – constituted a subversive presence. They were loose ends of a story that was supposed to have ended neatly when the Berlin Wall came down. As we hurried off to find warmth and a meal, this disconcerting encounter stuck with me, and I began to entertain this possibility: that the truths I had accumulated over the previous twenty years as a professional soldier – especially truths about the Cold War and U.S. foreign policy – might not be entirely true.

By temperament and upbringing, I had always taken comfort in orthodoxy. In a life spent subject to authority, deference had become a deeply ingrained habit. I found assurance in conventional wisdom. Now, I started, however hesitantly, to suspect that orthodoxy might be a sham. I began to appreciate that authentic truth is never simple and that any version of truth handed down from on high – whether by presidents, prime ministers, or archbishops – is inherently suspect. The powerful, I came to see, reveal truth only to the extent that it suits them. Even then, the truths to which they testify come wrapped in a nearly invisible filament of dissembling, deception, and duplicity. The exercise of power necessarily involves manipulation and is antithetical to candor.

I came to these obvious points embarrassingly late in life. “Nothing is so astonishing in education,” the historian Henry Adams once wrote, “as the amount of ignorance it accumulates in the form of inert facts.” Until that moment I had too often confused education with accumulating and cataloging facts. In Berlin, at the foot of the Brandenburg Gate, I began to realize that I had been a naif. And so, at age 41, I set out, in a halting and haphazard fashion, to acquire a genuine education.

Bacevich records a military visit to the university city of Jena in 1990. What he saw and experienced in his visits to Jena and Berlin “offered glimpses of a reality at odds with my most fundamental assumptions. Uninvited and unexpected, subversive forces had begun to infiltrate my consciousness. Bit by bit, my worldview started to crumble.”

Retiring from the military, Bacevich re-evaluated the assumptions that had constituted his “truth.” Viewing the rise of the imperial drive of this nation in its policy decisions he was shocked and disillusioned by the course of our international relations over the past two decades. “What should stand in the place of such discarded convictions,” he asked, “...arriving at even an approximation of truth would entail subjecting conventional wisdom, both past and present, to sustained and searching scrutiny. Cautiously at first but with growing confidence, this I vowed to do.” He writes,

...Doing so meant shedding habits of conformity acquired over decades. All of my adult life I had been a company man, only dimly aware of the extent to which institutional loyalties induce myopia. Asserting independence required first recognizing the extent to which I had been socialized to accept certain things as unimpeachable. Here then were the preliminary steps essential to making education accessible. Over a period of years, a considerable store of debris had piled up. Now, it all had to go. Belatedly, I learned that more often than not what passes for conventional wisdom is simply wrong. Adopting fashionable attitudes to demonstrate one's trustworthiness – the world of politics is flush with such people hoping thereby to qualify for inclusion in some inner circle – is akin to engaging in prostitution in exchange for promissory notes. It's not only demeaning but downright foolhardy.

My intention in bringing in Andrew Bacevich is not to deal with the content of his transformation; that is incidental to my purpose. I cite him simply as an illustration of one who experienced a shaking revolution in his worldview. He had been living by a truth that he could no longer affirm and that is a shattering experience. As he records that experience I get goose bumps because I've been there. I well remember times while studying in Europe that I wondered if I would ever again have a gospel to preach – or, for that matter, whether I would have anything to preach. I wondered if I might not have to sneak off into academia hoping to find a respectable teaching position.

To have a deep formation of mind and heart called into question and then to press on facing the possibility that one's whole life project was in jeopardy – that, simply stated, one might have committed one's life to what one could no longer affirm is a scary business. It takes courage to face up to that possibility. Sometimes one comes to a point of crisis and has no other option. Sometimes it may be simply a gnawing in the soul, wondering about the mystery of human being, a hunger and thirst for finding one's own voice, tired of living on borrowed truth, needing to be living out one's deepest intuitions and reasons of the heart.

One of the finest accounts of that personal quest is Herman Hesse's Nobel prize winning novel, *Siddhartha*. In the novel, Siddhartha, a young man, leaves his family, of India's highest caste – Brahmins – to pursue a contemplative life. After some years with a group of ascetics he leaves that path and enters a life of the flesh, fathering a son with a beautiful courtesan. But then growing restless again, bored and sickened by lust and greed, he moves on. Near despair, he comes to a river where he hears a unique sound. The sound signals the true beginning of his life – the beginning of suffering, rejection, peace and, finally, wisdom. It is a wonderful novel – a shimmering, iridescent tale of spiritual quest.

Siddhartha had been introduced to the finest wisdom and knowledge of his Brahmin heritage,

But where were the Brahmins, the priests, the wise men, who were successful not only in having this most profound knowledge, but in experiencing it?

He respected his father; he was worthy of admiration; his manner was quiet and noble. He lived a good life and was wise but Siddhartha wondered – did he live in bliss? Was he at peace? The young man concluded one must find the source within one's own self, one must possess it.

In his wanderings Siddhartha meets Gotama, the Buddha. He recognizes the wisdom of the Buddha's enlightenment. He is everything that has been claimed for him. But after hearing his teachings he makes bold to speak with the great man and he is graciously received. Graciously and sincerely he acknowledges Gotama's clear and cogent teachings; yet he raises the key issue for him.

“Do not be angry with me, O Illustrious One,” said the young man. “I have not spoken to you thus to quarrel with you about words. You are right when you say that opinions mean little, but may I say one thing more. I did not doubt you for one moment. Not for one moment did I doubt that you were the Buddha, that you have reached the highest goal which so many thousands of Brahmins and Brahmins' sons are striving to reach. You have done so by your own seeking, in your own way, through thought, through mediation, through knowledge, through enlightenment. You have learned nothing through teachings., and so I think, O Illustrious One, that nobody finds salvation through teachings. To nobody, O Illustrious One, can you communicate in words and teachings what happened to you in the hour of your enlightenment. The teachings of the enlightened Buddha embrace much, they teach much – how to live righteously, how to avoid evil. But there is one thing that this clear, worthy instruction does not contain; it does not contain the secret of what the Illustrious One himself experienced...

There you have it. Knowledge can be taught, instruction given, but the one thing Siddhartha sought cannot be taught – “the secret of what the Illustrious One himself experienced.” Inward illumination or the experience of enlightenment cannot be passed on. One can learn from stores of knowledge and expose oneself to the wisdom of the ages but to experience the inward illumination cannot be gotten from another – from a wise teacher or religious institution.

Epiphanies happen. If we are fortunate they happen to us. They happen not in a vacuum. They do not happen in haphazard fashion to just anyone. They are the reward of those who hunger and thirst for wisdom and understanding so that one lives out of one's own vision of the truth. And they happen most often to those in whom the spiritual thirst has been quickened in a community shaped by a vision of the truth. Further, inward illumination comes most often to one who has plumbed deeply one of the great traditions or spiritual paths. To win through to a place to stand that elicits one's true and authentic voice is demanding. But the

reward is worth the struggle. To live from one's true self is life's highest achievement.

The philosopher George Santayana wrote this marvelous statement: "Ultimate insights (now, that's what we are talking about) have a tendency to undermine the orthodox approaches by which they have been reached."

Ultimate insights, or the moment of enlightenment – I think that is what Santayana is referring to. The dogmatic structures can bring one to the threshold of that moment – apart from some such structure one would not arrive there. He goes on to say the enlightened one must not then undo that structure lest one thereby deprive another from the sturdy dogmatic shoulders that have supported one in the quest for "ultimate insights" by which one transcends the dogmatic structure. It is valuable if not yet "ultimate."

Hesse's *Siddhartha* may suggest the spiritual quest is a lonely way which one engages in all alone but I think that misses the author's point. It is a story of an individual in his search encountering a variety of experiences but the central claim is that no one, no external authority, be it person or book or institution, can effect the transformation where one exclaims, "Oh, I see!" That must happen from the inside out.

But, again, if that is a solitary experience, its "moment" is prepared in the soil of tradition, of community, of family involving spiritual practice, be it meditation, corporate worship involving liturgy, ritual, sacrament, proclamation based on the founding story. That moment is variously named. Jesus spoke of being "born from above" or "born anew," popularly spoken of as being "born again," in his conversation with Nicodemus – a teacher of Israel, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus "by night" not wanting to advertise the fact that he was giving credibility to Jesus.

Why did he come? Perhaps because, as Siddhartha expressed to the Buddha, one can be full of true and wise teachings and still be without inward illumination – that is, the experience of enlightenment when one truly "sees" with the soul.

In the early years of my ministry I remember the tension – regeneration – being born again was the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian scheme of things. I could catechize, teach and preach but I could not effect that new birth. And for those who claimed that experience, it was more likely to be an assent to a body of belief which assent resulted in the person being considered a Christian. Some of the more dramatic conversions might be referred to as "born again experiences" but that was not the rule.

There are branches of Christianity and in other religious traditions as well, where the emotions are targeted in an effort to bring the people to a charismatic experience or ecstasy. There are reports of such experiences as being life

changing but the more common experience is a temporary emotional high and in some groups or communities the corporate gathering is the time for an emotional “fix.”

But Jesus was not speaking of the emotions but rather an inward transformation, a spiritual birth effected by the Spirit of God. For some there is an identifiable date and place where the “lights” went on. I suspect for most who live from their own interior – their own compass of soul and intuitive vision, the transformation is gradual, one perhaps coming to realize one day that one’s whole being has been transformed.

St. Paul was an example of crisis, of an unforgettable moment of encounter. For him a vision, a voice, and a 180 degree turn. But the moment of crisis did not stand alone. The very frenzy with which he was opposing the Jewish Jesus movement, the movement called “The People of the Way” was evidence that he was fighting something he sensed might be genuine, real, true. “The Hound of Heaven” had been pursuing him. The autobiographical note in his letter to the Philippians describes his life-transforming experience. He warns against those he considers false teachers and then very interestingly claims his detractors can’t stand in his shadow at their own game.

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh – even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

That was the pre-Damascus-Road Paul and obviously he had been serious – a real religious “blue blood” as it were. And from other writings we know he valued all of that highly. But he had seen something else. Paul’s “conversion” was not to another religion. He was born and he died a Jew as Jesus was born and died a Jew. But that moment of illumination changed everything, as he writes.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming

like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul, more than Jesus, gave shape to the Jewish Jesus movement that embraced non-Jews and eventually became the Christian Church. He was as passionate to proclaim his new insight as he had been to stamp out “The Way,” pre-Damascus Road. And there is no question that he was effective and his ministry bore great fruit. It is my sense, however, that he was not as effective as Jesus in reaching the heart of those who were addressed.

In the Gospels we read that Jesus held the crowds with his teaching and story telling. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew writes,

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.
(Matthew 7: 28-29)

And as his ministry came to a climax in Jerusalem following the Palm Sunday event, Luke records:

Then he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling things there; and he said, “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer’; but you have made it a den of robbers.”

Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.

One day, as he was teaching the people in the temple and telling the good news, the chief priests and the scribes came with the elders and said to him, “Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?”

He answered them, “I will also ask you a question, and you tell me: Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”

They discussed it with one another, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say, ‘Why did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ all the people will stone us; for they are convinced that John was a prophet.” So they answered that they did not know where it came from.

Then Jesus said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”

I find the juxtaposition of the citations from Matthew and Luke fascinating. The authenticity of Jesus as one speaking his own deepest truth caused the people to hear him as one having authority. Yet, of course, authority that emanated from within him for he had no power. The Temple “authorities,” scribes and elders, on the other hand had power but lacked the authority that stems from inner being. So the powerless Jesus is heard as one speaking with authority; the authorities in power are powerless with the people.

What Luke records of the Temple authorities asking Jesus by what authority he carried out the prophetic protest in the Temple presents us with a typical case of those in power threatened by one who clearly has that inward strength and sense of presence that draws others to himself and is able to enlist others in a movement for change. We see it again and again in religion, in politics and government. Once in power the prime consideration too often becomes how to protect and preserve and perpetuate the position of power. And that’s the difference.

A Jesus of historical record, a fictional Siddhartha are not about power. They are about effecting change in themselves and in community from egoistic ambition to compassion, to empathy, to union. That is the wonder of such transformation. One lives with a heart that embraces, marked by love. Not that one is without principle, without passion for justice, for human wellbeing. But one is wary of ideological positions that divide and blind one to a larger vision. One is able to listen, to seek deeper understanding, to empathize with the other. And one becomes sensitive to one’s own limits, biases, fears and blind spots.

For much of my own journey, the early years of ministry, being born by the Spirit from above was in order to be saved. Salvation was narrowly conceived – salvation from self, sin and guilt. Salvation to find its reward in another realm in a future world. Too late, but thankfully at last, I yield to Siddhartha’s truth – the experience of enlightenment is the experience of salvation in which I find my truth, my voice. My authority is within and here and now I am at home, at peace, mantled by Grace, trusting the deep intuitions of my heart – the gift of being born from above.

And so, in conclusion, whose truth are you living? By what authority? I wish I could effect in you the experience which, transcending all knowledge and teaching, would enable you to say, “Oh! I see!” and then to rest, to trust the intuitions of your heart – in a word – to be born from above. That I cannot do; no one can. Thank God I suspect most of you know the experience. And if you find yourself still wandering and wondering, hear this word from the great Hebrew prophet, Jeremiah, who speaks in God’s place _

When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29: 13)

References:

Andrew Bacevich. *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War*. Metropolitan Books, 2010.

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