

More power to you: The wise practice of Christian authority

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“Speak truth to power.” The phrase resonates with the biblical prophets and the courage it takes to challenge those who become preoccupied with maintaining their power at the expense of truth—as well as justice, fairness and compassion. The phrase rings powerfully true in situations such as that of Robert Mugabe’s rule over Zimbabwe or the stonewalling silence of a church in the wake of a sexual abuse crisis.

Yet in American culture, and especially in mainline Protestantism, the phrase has become hackneyed. Pastors invoke the phrase in sermons; seminary professors call on it in classroom lectures; groups organize around it. One person even suggested to me that the phrase is not just an element of pastoral ministry, but the very heart of the pastoral vocation.

Is it really? The phrase can be as blinding as it is revealing; it can induce self-deception as often as it does courage. When we say “speak truth to power” we assume that we are the ones with the truth, and someone else has the power. Sometimes that is true. But sometimes we deceive ourselves, thinking that we possess the truth when all involved may have at most partial perspectives, or thinking that we lack power when we actually have power and need to exercise it.

As a result, we neither develop the skills of listening to interlocutors to see if they might have something truthful to say to us, nor learn how to identify our power and use it faithfully. Pastors have a great deal of authority, understood as legitimated power. They exercise formal authority in such settings as worship and in the administration and oversight of congregations. They also have significant informal authority in people’s lives and a variety of civic settings, both because of the office they hold and because of the character they are presumed to embody.

Pastors must recognize the importance of authority and exercise it well. Have we blinded ourselves to this reality?

My concern intensified after I talked with a well-respected teacher who recently paired his course on leadership with a course on “exercising authority.” He said that he’s seen many people going into the social sector who are wary of terms like leadership and even more wary of using their legitimated power for the good of the whole. In his view this is due in part to personalities and temperaments and in part to personal histories, especially bad experiences with authority figures.

My colleague wondered whether people in positions of religious leadership have an even more pronounced wariness of power and authority than others in public leadership. My initial reaction was to think he is right, especially because Christians are acutely aware of the predicament of sin. We recall Jesus’ own prophetic criticisms of the powers and his injunctions against his disciples’ pursuit of self-interested power. In response to James and John’s request for power, Jesus said: “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (Mark 10:42-43).

Any Christian understanding of authority and power must take into account the complexities of sin and Jesus’ own teaching. But have we become so preoccupied with the critiques that we have failed to articulate what a wise practice of Christian authority might look like? What if we were to enrich our understanding of authority and power by studying our biblical traditions more deeply?

For example, within the prophetic tradition there is an important conception of “prophetic blessing,” exemplified in the story of Balaam’s donkey. In a culture of polarization in which “powerful” and “powerless” groups often both feel as though the other is winning, a commitment to prophetic blessing of whole communities may be an important exercise of faithful Christian authority and power.

Further, there are biblical traditions of the judges, and of the cultivation and exercise of wisdom, which rarely are invoked in our conceptions of Christian ministry. How might we think about the cultivation of habits and practices that carry a critical and constructive awareness of the inevitability and goodness of leadership and authority embodied in Israel’s struggles to be faithful to God?

We might also turn to those pastoral epistles that Protestants have too often dismissed as “early Catholicism” for their wisdom about authority, leadership and institutional vitality. Examining the biblical narrative before and after Jesus can enrich and reshape how we understand Jesus’ message, authority and power. After

all, even as Jesus critically engaged the abuses of power and authority, reforming them for the kingdom, he drew on a rich heritage of Israel's institutional embodiment and authority across generations.

It is easier to call ourselves to "speak truth to power." It may be more faithful to our vocation, however, to recover richer conceptions of truth and power as we bear witness to the gospel.