

CAN YOU SPEAK TRUTH TO AUTHORITY?

Today's Text: Acts 15: 1- 35

Extracts:

And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that [they] and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders about this question. ...And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things had done with them. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses." Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them, "...we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as [the Gentiles]" [Acts 15: 1-2, 4-5, 7a, 11]

Under its laudable policy to accelerate housing development in Lagos, Africa's most populous city of close to 17 million people, the Lagos State Government [LASG] in 1985 forcefully (by an edict) acquired lands for the Shangisha/Magodo Estate Scheme 2 without compensating their owners.¹The Shangisha Landlords Association (SLA) went to court to seek redress. In 1994, the Lagos High Court ruled in their favour. The LASG appealed and again lost in 2001 at the Federal Appeal Court. Still not satisfied, the government appealed to the Supreme Court. In February 2012, the apex court in Nigeria ruled in favour of the landlords and ordered the LASG to immediately allocate 549 plots to them or give them plots of their choice. Reacting to waiting for 27 years to finally get justice, the leader of the SLA, Chief Adebayo Adeyiga, now 80 years old said, "If I die now, I can rest in peace."

Why did the dispute take so long to resolve? It is because governments in Nigeria (as a result of long years of military rule, 1966-99) tend to believe in the rule of force, not of law. However, it took the courts to speak truth to people drunk with power. In the end, truth prevailed, no matter how long it took. In this week's Bible story, there was a major dispute within the early church on the means to salvation-by works or by faith? Paul and Barnabas stood up to the Jewish church leaders and won. Let us find out what we can learn from that story to help us to speak truth to those in authority over us.

¹ Based on a report by Lemmy Ugehgebe, "27 years after, Lagos loses to Shangisha land-owners at S'Court," Mon., 13 Feb. 2012;

http://www.ngrguardiannews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=76923:27-years-after-lagos-loses-to-shangisha-land-owners-at-scourt&catid=1:national&Itemid=559

1. **Background: A major dispute over circumcision breaks out in the early church**

The word of God enjoins every one of us to be subject to the governing authorities because “there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God” [Rom. 13: 1]. Such authorities could be *government, church and business leaders* as well as our *parents and guardians*. But should we be subject to them in everything, including what they do that does not glorify God? I doubt! *It is not everyone in authority that has integrity. But can you tell them the truth when they go wrong? How can you do so without sounding judgmental or attracting sanctions? That is the challenge that we shall examine in this week’s study.*

Some of us happen to be cheer leaders for people in authority. We raise the ovation level each time, even when they do something horrendous. Some people may call it loyalty but it is more of sycophancy and blind loyalty than anything else. For example, when David fled to Ahimelech the priest to escape King Saul’s persecution, it was Doeg, the chief of Saul’s herdsmen, who saw David and went to report to the king [1 Sam. 21: 7]. When Saul confronted the priest and his colleagues on the matter, Ahimelech maintained his innocence. The king ordered his soldiers to kill the priests but no one moved. Doeg came forward and killed eighty-five of the priests [1 Sam. 22:6-18]. In like manner, the hired assassins used by drug lords or corrupt politicians to eliminate their opponents today are in Doeg’s class.

Some of us may want to tell the truth but we are too scared to do so for fear of sanctions or loss of privileges. For example, the Jewish leaders had determined that anyone that confessed the miracles of Jesus should be thrown out of the synagogue. After He had healed the man blind from birth, the Jewish leaders called his parents to confirm it. They answered, “We know that this is our son and that he was born blind, but by what means he now sees, we do not know, or who opened his eyes, we do not know. He is of age; ask him. He will speak for himself” [Jn 9: 20-22]! See how easily many corrupt political, religious and business leaders, especially in developing societies with weak institutional checks and balances, get away with their loot or waywardness because those subordinates who have information on them are afraid or unwilling to come out.

Some of us are active collaborators, sometimes unknowingly. We think we are doing our duties as our bosses’ errand boys and girls. In truth, we are comrades-in-crime or sin. For example, there were no telephone or texting facilities at the time that King David saw from his palace roof another man’s wife having a bath. He certainly sent a servant to go and bring Bathsheba, Uriah’s wife, through a quiet passage door into his bedroom! When she became pregnant, it was David’s servants who helped to hide their master’s sin, leading to the murder of Uriah in the battle front [2 Sam. 11: 1-17]. Think of the advice you gave to your boss when he began to flirt with his married secretary? What did you tell your priest or

pastor when he began to sexually abuse the altar boys or choir girls in your place of worship? Did you advise to let sleeping dogs lie? Did you sweep everything under the carpet? ***Sooner than later, the carpet will swell up and become stinky. Sooner than later, hungry and brutalized dogs can no longer sleep! We have no choice but to face the truth and speak it to those in authority over us.***

In this week's Bible story, Paul and Barnabas found the legitimacy and spiritual significance of their work among the Gentiles being questioned by Jewish leaders that they came across during their first missionary journey. Let us follow the story:

a) *The dispute among the brethren*

Some Jewish people that were among the believers came from Judea and taught the Gentiles, ***“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved”*** [Acts 15: 1]. That completely flew in the face of Paul's sermon to the Gentiles that in Christ, ***“neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything but faith working through love”*** [Gal. 5: 6]. Abraham was justified by faith [Gen. 15: 9] long before he was circumcised and became the father of the Jews [Gen.17: 9-12]. That is why he is the father of all those that believe [Rom. 4: 14]. But who was going to be able or bold enough to make that point to the Jewish leaders of Paul's days? He and Barnabas tried but ***“had no small dissension.”*** So, they decided to take the matter to the church leaders in Jerusalem [Acts 15: 2].

Are fellow workers in your office or worshippers in your church grumbling quietly about the arbitrariness of your elders in dealing with disputes that are polluting the harmony there? Are you discussing in hush tones the allegations against your leaders that are gaining screaming headlines in the media? Are you more concerned about the image of your home or office or congregation or political party than knowing the truth of the matter? Who is going to bell the cat? Who is going to take the matter to the Jerusalem council of truth in your community?

b) *The Jerusalem Council met to resolve the matter*

The Jerusalem Council consisted of the ***apostles*** and ***elders of the church*** [v. 4], led by its pillars- James, the Lord's brother, Peter and John [Gal. 2: 9]. There were also ***Pharisees (who had become believers)*** in the council [Acts 15: 5]. Paul and Barnabas were well received by the church elders. After telling how God had done great things through them, they obviously placed the contentious issue of justification before the Council for adjudication.

The Pharisees among them maintained that it was necessary to circumcise the Gentiles and command them to keep the Law of Moses. The matter caused “much dispute” [vv. 6-7]. It had reached the stage when some truth needed to be told to the elders.

Peter stood up to speak. He began by referring to *his own personal experience on the matter*. God had used him to bring the gospel to the household of a prominent Gentile, Cornelius, the Roman officer [Acts 10]. To prepare him, a Jew, for the mission, God had shown him a vision in which he was required to kill and eat unclean animals. Three times he was shown and each time he objected to eating what was unclean but the Lord insisted to him not to call unclean what God had made clean. Soon after, the people sent by the centurion came to where Peter was staying at Joppa. That was when it dawned on him that only those who believed in Jesus the Christ, in His name, would receive remission for their sins. On that occasion, God gave the Gentiles the Holy Spirit by faith, just as He had given the Jews by faith. [vv. 9-43]. Concluding, Peter challenged his colleagues not to put a yoke on the neck of the Gentiles which neither their fathers nor they were able to bear. *Salvation is by faith in Jesus and it applies to both Jews and Gentiles alike* [Acts 15: 7-10]. Paul and Barnabas corroborated Peter’s story by testifying about what God had done among the Gentiles during their missionary journey that they had just completed [v. 11].

It was at that stage that James, the Lord’s brother, stood up to support Peter, Paul and Barnabas, quoting the prophets to show that Jesus Christ was manifested in flesh to complete God’s redeeming work for humankind. He then passed the Council’s judgment on the matter as follows: that the Gentiles should not be troubled about circumcision but only about holy living, such as abstaining from idol worship and sexual immorality [vv. 12-29]. The Council agreed with him and the decision was conveyed in a letter to the Gentiles.

You can imagine the joy that the Gentile church at Antioch felt when they received the letter conveyed to them through Judas and Silas, both prophets. We are told, “When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.” Judas and Silas “exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words,” and remained there for some time before they brought back greetings to Jerusalem. In fact, Silas did not go back to Jerusalem. Instead, he remained with Paul and Barnabas in Antioch “teaching and preaching the word of Lord, with many others also” [vv. 30-35]. When you recall that it was in Antioch that disciples were first called Christians [Acts 11: 26], *the settlement of that dispute became a watershed in the spread of Christianity to the rest of the world. It took speaking truth to authority to bring that about.*

2. Lessons to help you speak truth to authority

The time has come for you to take the bull by the horn and resolve those issues that are poisoning relations in your home, church or office. ***Every party to a dispute cannot be right but the truth will hurt and humiliate the wrong party. That is why you need to master the techniques of speaking truth to authority.*** From this week's study, the following guidelines can be quite helpful:

a) *Know the truth yourself*

Paul and Barnabas, Peter and James all knew the truth concerning justification by faith. That was why they were able to accept it as the truth. Therefore, ***you must seek first to know the truth about a matter before you can establish that what your leaders are doing could be wrong.*** For example, after Pharaoh's magicians realized that the battle with Moses was actually with God, they said to their king, "This is the finger of God." Even though he did not heed them, they had at least spoken the truth to him [Ex. 8: 19].

How, for example, can you confront your boss who has been accused of embezzlement of public funds if you cannot separate facts from slander? How can you defend your father against your mother's allegation of domestic violence against her if you do not find out what the facts are? So, you must know the truth for it to set you free [Jn 8: 32].

b) *Identify the stakeholders in the matter and what they want*

Sometimes, ***a crisis may be more a battle over turf than issues.*** For example, the leadership tussle among the leaders of your church after the death of its founder may have nothing to do with doctrine but political control. So, after establishing the truth, find out who the stakeholders are and what they want. ***It is only the stakeholders who are trying to uphold the truth that you should support and encourage.*** For example, when there were contentions among brethren in the Corinthian church, Paul noticed that factions were formed by those who saw themselves as followers of Paul, Apollos and Cephas (Peter) or Christ. Paul knew that only those following Christ were right and he chastised the factions, saying, "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" [1 Cor. 1: 11-13].

Therefore, ***do not go for political exigencies or compromises that cannot last.*** You are either hot or cold. The neck is not the same thing as the throat! So, ***if you must hurt a party, hurt the liar.***

c) *Find how best to convey the truth to all because some people will be hurt!*

The greatest challenge that you will face is how to convey the truth to people in higher authority without inviting trouble to yourself or in order to get them to listen to you. Some leaders only like their egos to be massaged and they have no stomach for anything critical of their conduct. Therefore, you must find a way to overcome whatever will block their ears from hearing you.

A very good example of one such approach is *the use of projective techniques, such as parables that Jesus used extensively against Jewish leaders*. You create a third person that you can paint with your target's misconduct and let him/her judge that person. Prophet Nathan used a parable to get through to David after he had committed adultery and murder in the matter of Uriah and his wife, Bathsheba. The prophet told David the story of a rich man that had a visitor. Instead of killing some of his sheep to entertain the visitor, he killed a poor neighbour's ewe lamb. David became enraged and said, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this shall surely die!" The prophet replied, "You are the man!" [**2 Sam. 12: 1-15**]. Some leaders are very receptive to truth if you can confront them alone without witnesses or when you let them know quietly that what they are asking you to do is illegal or immoral.

d) *Get ready for the backlash!*

Ask the prophet Elijah what happened to him after he had openly disgraced King Ahab and his wicked wife, Jezebel by killing 450 prophets of Baal. He had to run for his life when she threatened to kill him [**1 Kgs 19: 1-4**]. John the Baptist was thrown into jail and subsequently beheaded for daring to question Herod the tetrarch for marrying his brother, Philip's wife [**Matt. 14: 1-10**]. Therefore, you will not be spared for telling truth to authority. You may not be brought into the "inner circle" because you cannot be trusted. You may suffer persecution. But always remember, your reward will be great before your Father in heaven [**Matt. 5: 10**].

3. **Conclusion: There can only be one Truth-Jesus!**

Right now, there may be conflicting claims to the truth of God in your community. Some people are telling you that in the spirit of give-and-take, we are all worshipping the same God no matter what they call Him. But when Thomas asked Jesus to show His followers the Father, Jesus replied, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through Me" [**Jn 14: 5-6**]. Can you speak that truth to those in authority in your country who are threatening to kill you or to deny you freedom of worship all in the name of secularity?

Can you really speak truth to authority?