

Keynote Address to the 2017 ACC National Conference

Courage in a Post-Truth World

In the sustained attack on godly values in society, one of the biggest victims has been *truth* – so that, increasingly over the decades, many people stopped believing in objective truth – or even that objective truth actually exists.

So that truth became relative, and we started hearing statements such as, “Well that may be true *for you*, but it’s not true *for me*.”

Although most of us may have grown up in an era where truth was valued and where scientific research to *discover* truth held a high place in society, we have come to live in a world described by the term “*post-truth*” – which was named last year’s word of the year by the Oxford Dictionary!

The term *post-truth* relates to circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotions and personal beliefs; so *post-truth* doesn’t so much mean “after truth”, but that the notion of truth itself is irrelevant.

Further, this idea of *post-truth* is closely linked with two other concepts:

- Truthiness; (which relates to the tendency to believe something to be true because it feels right, or because our gut tells us it *ought to be true*); and
- Confirmation bias (which expresses the idea that we are more likely to uncritically accept ideas or opinions as true if they tend to reinforce what we already believe).

That is, in a post-truth world, people tend to seek out and lend credence to those sources of information that tend to confirm their biases, and they begin to reject the idea that there are any unbiased, objective sources of truth.

Now, this is an issue for those of us who believe that the Holy Bible is God’s Word for His world because, unlike the speculative writings of other religions, the Bible is grounded in God’s loving truth – a truth framed by narrative: what people saw, heard, said, and did.

Further, because we believe that God’s loving truth is good for all society, we not only seek to *hold to* God’s truth, but to *proclaim* that truth – something that requires considerable courage in today’s *post-truth* environment.

1. *Courage: The Imperative*

The imperative for us to stand with courage for truth in today’s world is simply because God’s loving truth is more important than anything else.

The early Christians knew this truth, and rather than proclaim ‘Caesar is Lord’ they proclaimed ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’ even though, in doing so, they faced serious consequences, even the possibility of gruesome death.

What's more, they risked the very reputation of the church when they rescued unwanted children left to die of exposure – something not uncommon in the Roman world. Why would rescuing children risk the reputation of the church? Simply because their faithful actions risked the established order of the Roman world, in which human life was disposable – particularly the lives of unwanted children.

Hence lies circulated about Christ-followers and, as with many lies, they were based on a distortion of the facts. Their detractors linked Christ-followers' observance of the Lord's Supper with their rescuing children to create rumours that Christians were cannibals, and their loving actions were misrepresented as the actions of barbarians who wanted children to eat.

In risking everything to stand for truth, these early Christians were following the example of the likes of Daniel in all of Babylon, in Mede and in Persia – where, even though his enemies sought to find fault in him, the only fault they could find was concerning his persisting faith in YHWH, the Lord of heaven and Earth (see *Daniel* 6:1-5). These jealous officials therefore went to King Darius, persuading him to proclaim a law to the effect that anyone who prayed to anyone – divine or human – other than the king would be thrown to the lions.

Knowing the law and the consequences, Daniel risked everything by continuing to pray at home in his upstairs room, as usual; as a result of this behaviour the plotters raised the matter with the king who – although he regretted signing the law – nonetheless upheld the law and threw Daniel to the lions, saying “*May your God, whom you worship continually, rescue you*”. (from *Daniel* 6:16 NLT).

Daniel knew that there were things far more important than his reputation, his position – or even his life.

And, like Daniel, we, too, are foreigners in an alien land, as attested by Peter – and we, too, are warned to keep away from evil desires that fight against our very souls, and to be careful how we live among our unbelieving neighbours, who may be looking to accuse us of doing wrong (*1 Peter* 2:11-12).

Perhaps I could best sum up this section on the imperative for courage by using the words of Jesus Christ, as recorded by Matthew:

“If any of you wants to be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross, and follow me. If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find true life. And how do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?” (*Matthew* 16:24-26 NLT).

2. *Courage: The Basis*

The basis for the courage we are to demonstrate in standing for God's loving truth is not grounded in who *we* are, what *we* have done or can do – but firmly grounded in who *God* is, what *He* has done, and what *He* will do, even through us!

The Israelites stood on the East side of the Jordan River after wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. All they had ever known was wilderness wanderings, and now they faced the prospect of crossing the river and making war with standing armies protected by walled cities; and when they have taken the land, these wilderness wanderers needed to learn how to live in the land, to cultivate it, and to defend it – all things with which they were entirely unfamiliar. What's more, the river was in flood and Moses, the only leader they had ever known was dead; so that Joshua's first action as leader was to lead the people across the flooded river opposite Jericho, a walled and well-defended city.

Why not wait for a few weeks until the flooded water receded?

Why not move up-river and plan to cross to a place with less military significance, and perhaps neither army nor walled city?

The place and time may seem wrong, but because we have confidence in YHWH and in His word, we are also confident that God's time and place are *always* right; and our basis for courage is identical to Joshua's: "*I command you – be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.*" (Joshua 1:9 NLT)

Our basis for courage is the confident assurance of God's presence. And for those of us who live on *this* side of Easter, we hear in God's words to Joshua the echo of words later uttered by Christ himself, whom Matthew records as saying:

"I have been given complete authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

3. *Courage: The Legacy*

We live in a world where we are encouraged to have a long view – to plan not only for today or even tomorrow or next week, but also to start planning for our retirement income when we start earning income in our teens or twenties. However, even though we are encouraged to have a long-term view in many aspects of life, as Christ-followers, we are called to faithfulness to God's call on our lives and to leave the results to him.

If we are faithful – if we courageously stand for God's truth – regardless of the immediate consequences, we build a legacy of faith; and who knows where that might lead?

For Stephen, of whom we read in the Book of Acts, his courage in the face of death led to many others being willing to remain faithful to death. However, as an increasing number of people came to Christ as a result, the Roman Empire was changed forever: even current museum exhibitions on gladiators attest to the contribution the rise of Christianity made on the decline of gladiatorial conquests and all that went with them.

Biblically, we see a number of accounts of the legacy of God's faithfulness.

Esther, for example, was a young Jewish girl in exile by whose courage the Jewish nation in exile was preserved, and eventually returned to their homeland, in which – a few centuries later – Mary gave birth to the baby Jesus, the Son of God, who was sent by the Father because of His great love for us, His creation.

What Esther did in approaching the king without being called for took enormous courage, and could have had disastrous consequences. However, Esther acted courageously, motivated by those wonderful words of Mordecai: *“Who can say but that you have been elevated to the palace for such a time as this?”* (From *Esther* 4:14)

The remains of the palace where Darius and Xerxes were king – where Esther was queen – can be visited in the Iranian city of Shush (the ancient city of Susa). In that same city is Daniel's tomb, a revered place for Iranian Muslims even today. Although the people who visit the tomb to pray do not understand why Iranian Muslims revere the tomb of a Jewish prophet, the reason arises from Biblical truth. Immediately following the account of Daniel's emergence from the den of lions unharmed, we read that the king (Darius) sent a message to the entire empire testifying that all people should tremble with fear before the God of Daniel: *“For he is the living God, and he will endure forever. His kingdom will never be destroyed, and his rule will never end.”* (From *Daniel* 6:26 NLT)

Could Daniel ever have imagined the legacy of his courageous faithfulness? That, more than 2,000 years after his death, Iranian Muslims would revere his tomb as a sacred place?

But notice this: In Shush, Iran, today the palace of kings lies in ruins, but Daniel's tomb stands strong, and is visited daily by Iranian Muslims, who pray at the tomb, giving thanks for Daniel.

What a legacy?

And who of us here today knows what legacy of faith we can be a part in building as we act and speak with courage in the cause of God's loving truth in this post-truth world we inhabit?

Conclusion: Speaking into a post-truth world

Living in a post-truth world doesn't diminish the importance of holding to God's loving truth; however, it does impact *how* we communicate:

1. When speaking truth to a post-truth world, we should do so calmly, persistently, prayerfully, deliberately, and intentionally – both guarding ourselves against a drift towards *truthiness*, **and** demonstrating respect for those we encounter; and
2. Rather than only speaking truth **reactively** – which still allows others to set the agenda with which we merely engage – we need to find ways to speak truth **proactively**. With courage, dignity and diligence we should proclaim proactively that humility is a virtue, that meekness is strength, that looking out for the other person and caring for the downtrodden are their own rewards, that all people are equal in the sight of God – ***and that our very society has been built on these and other values that come straight from our Lord!***

Or, using the words of the apostle Peter, who urged Christ-followers to faithful living in a foreign world:

“You must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if you are asked about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But you must do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak evil against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ. Remember, it is better to suffer for doing good, if that is what God wants, than to suffer for doing wrong!” (1 Peter 3:15-17 NLT)

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Rev Ashley Saunders is available to speak at churches throughout Australia.