

# Honoring the Truth-Teller

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## The Meaning of Truth

The Greek word that is translated *truth* in the New Testament is a very powerful and meaningful word. It is *alethia*. The *a* (alpha) at the beginning of a Greek word often means that it is a negation of the rest of the Greek word. For instance, the English word *atheist* comes from *a-theos* which means literally *no god*. In the case of *alethia* the literal meaning of this word is *nothing hidden*. This means that the phrase found in Scripture that describes the Holy Spirit as the *Spirit of Truth* literally would be the *Spirit who allows nothing to be hidden*.

Vine's Dictionary of New Testament Words defines this Greek word that is translated as *truth* as meaning:

*The reality lying at the basis of an appearance, the manifested, veritable essence of a matter.*

This definition should inform us that the Spirit of Truth is always working to move us as believers beyond the *appearance* of a person, a matter or an organization to discover its *reality* and *essence*.

## Leaders Need Truth in Proportion to Influence

The Bible speaks a great deal about the value of truthfulness in relationships. The subject of reproof in Scripture is a good example of this. Only *the fool* and *the wicked man* according to Proverbs cannot hear godly reproof. Reproof is always the truth as someone else sees it. Consider King David's words about his need for those around him to speak to him truthfully from their perspective:

*Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head... Psalm 141:5*

Our responsibility to hear the truth from individuals around us grows in proportion to the sphere of our influence. The larger the influence, the more we need people around us to speak their perception of the truth to us and the less likely they are to do it. Leaders must teach and emphasize truthfulness or they will more likely get affirmation from their subordinates rather than truthfulness.

## **Recognizing the Truth in Different Packages**

The leader must also recognize truth when it comes. It seldom will come in a nice package and identify itself as truth. Truth can come to us in the form of the unflattering opinions of others, angry words, criticisms and even slander. The speakers will almost always see themselves as telling the truth. As King David said in the passage above, sometimes the truth-teller will *smite* us. Nearly all of these kinds of *smiting events* will have an element of truth that needs to be discerned. The leader who is insecure will not glean the truth about himself and his organization from these uncomfortable *truth events* and can dishonor the person seeking to tell the truth. Embraced truth will set us free no matter what package it comes in.

## **Actions and Attitudes Reveal Values**

The leader who verbally encourages truthfulness must be prepared to continue his instruction when he actually gets truthful feedback from his subordinates. If the feedback comes in one of these uncomfortable packages, if he is not careful, he may shut down the flow of information to him by his response. If he acts insecure, angry or quietly withdraws from that person, he teaches by his actions that he does not value truthfulness. In other words, value systems are always observable in the behavior of leaders. For instance, if the leader judges the input of the truth-teller by how well he or she offered that input, the leader will receive decreasing truthfulness from those around him. He has taught by his attitudes and behavior that truthfulness is not valued. If individuals around him must earn the right to speak the truth to him by proven loyalty, he is training and producing subordinate leaders that will value loyalty over the truth. Leaders who have been trained this way will speak very little truth to him and confuse affirmation with truthful feedback. Neither will they honor the truth-teller when he speaks to them.

## **Speaking the Truth Wisely**

Because the truth is often difficult to hear, it is necessary for those who feel responsibility to speak truth to do it as wisely as possible. Failure to do this insures that we will not spiritually grow up. The Bible connects our *spiritual growth* with *speaking the truth*. It tells us that speaking must be out of the motive of *love*.

*But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ... Ephesians 4:15*

This means that the truth-teller must have sincere concern for the person and organization that he is speaking to. This is where truth telling becomes an expression of love. In the military, the value system of officers says that they

should speak the truth to their commanders. However, there is also a value that says loyalty to the leader means that you speak to him in a way that does not embarrass the leader or damage his reputation within the military organization. Normally, that means that confrontational truth is spoken in private and with proper military courtesy. Conversely, the commander has the responsibility to hear the truth no matter how poorly it was spoken by the subordinate. This requires him to be secure in himself and to earnestly desire the truth from his subordinates. The reaction of the commander to the subordinate's truth-telling will teach the subordinate whether or not he can continue to speak the truth to this particular commander. The same thing is true in the Church and all organizations. Leaders must love the truth, even when it *smites* them, and appreciate the truth-teller if they want all their subordinates to continue keeping them properly informed.

Leaders of local churches and all organizations of the Church must allow subordinates the right to speak the truth as they see it. They must maintain a value system that honors the person seeking to tell the truth. They must not see truth-telling as disloyal behavior. Failure to do this will produce serious hidden problems within the organizations of the Church and make the truthful person an outcast. This cannot be what the Spirit of Truth, *the Spirit who allows nothing to be hidden* desires in the churches and organizations of the Kingdom of God.

### **Values Produce Predictable Behavior**

Prior to 1993, I was an active duty Army Chaplain. During that season in my life, I taught leadership skills to officers and non-commissioned officers in leadership retreats as a part of my ministry. I often used management games to teach these leaders about leadership. In one management game called "Powerplay", a scenario is created where these leaders were arbitrarily divided into groups by virtue of winning in a trading scenario. The winning group is then given authority over the other groups. The winning group is given the right to make the rules for future trading and to dictate these rules to the other groups. Without exception, the group that has the authority always begins to make rules to keep its authority and to benefit it as a group in trading. Given enough time the winning group will begin to clearly abuse the other groups. This group will justify its behavior on the basis of winning the earlier portion of the game and by virtue of having the authority.

### **Reactions of Different Abused Groups**

In those retreats where non-commissioned officers (sergeants) were involved, the sergeants would allow themselves to be abused. Their overriding value was loyalty to the authority no matter what transpired or how unfairly they were treated. They were unhappy and grumbled among themselves during the abuse but did not do

anything productive to deal with it. They offered no feedback, no confrontation, and no truth from their perspective to the abusive group of sergeants. This was characteristic of nearly all the sergeants that I played this game with. This revealed that their values were highly loyal but truthfulness was weak as a value. (Of course, there were a few exceptional sergeants that would have been better officers by nature.)

The reactions of the officers in the officer leadership retreats were entirely different. As the group of officers who abused them became more abusive, the officers became increasingly active and alert to their responsibility to deal with the unfair situation. They offered feedback that was largely ignored. They devised *strikes*; in other words, they withdrew and would not cooperate with the abusive authority. They often tried to continue to confront the abusive group. They tried to negotiate a more just situation. In nearly all cases, the group in authority would become increasingly authoritarian and created more rules strictly for their own benefit and to keep the *rebels* in line. The abusive group would often say that the other officer groups were not *playing fair* when they rebelled, withdrew or failed to cooperate. In other words, the group with the authority became blind to their abuse and blamed the abused groups for withdrawing and not wanting to play the game anymore.

### **Not Valuing Truth Results in Blindness**

Blindness is characteristic of organizations and leaders that do not value truthfulness in their relationships. This is because truth telling has been stifled in a loyalty-based organizations or individuals. Because there is no honest feedback, they will often be blind to their abusive behavior and honestly wonder why others are reacting. There will be no one to tell them that it is wrong to shift the blame for difficulties in the relationships to the victims of their abusive behavior.

The value of truth is what keeps a local church or any organization from becoming like a cult. Honoring the truth-teller is a characteristic of godly relationships. Dishonoring the truth-teller is a characteristic of cults. Cultic behavior, which always includes blindness, will result from an overemphasis of loyalty above the truth. Leaders must understand that their own desire for loyalty may overcome truthfulness in their subordinates. They must actively cultivate truthfulness along with loyalty in their subordinates.

### **Different Values and Expectations**

This game also revealed that different kinds of people have different values and expectations. Commissioned Officers are taught in the military that proper

submission means that they will speak to the superior officer with *courage* and *candor (truthfulness)* about organizational problems. Officers who will not confront their commander when necessary are poor excuses for leaders. Commanders who will not hear the honest, truthful input of their subordinates without penalty are poor commanders.

The *officer type* of leader expects to be treated well by other leaders. He expects his input to be valued and genuinely considered. When the behavior of an organization and its primary leaders do not match the *officer type leader's* values, he will withdraw or try negotiation. If the negotiation fails, he will leave the organization and move on, similar to an officer resigning his commission. The *officer type* of leader will want to fix the organization's larger problems and will not ordinarily be silent about them. If the organizational values lean too far to loyalty and not enough on truthfulness, this type of leader will often be seen as not being a *team player* and be penalized by being privately labeled as such. As a result the organization may lose this valuable leader as he discovers the truth of how the organization actually sees him.

The *sergeant type* of leader will remain loyal to a fault. He will adjust to the problems and not necessarily ever speak *truthfully* to the organization. There is nothing wrong with this type of person; in fact, they are greatly needed in all organizations. However, in unhealthy organizations, the *sergeant type* of leader is valued above the *officer type* of leader. The *officer type* of person can help an organization to deal with its problems and therefore grow. If an organization creates an atmosphere for genuine honesty and truthfulness, it will attract many of the *officer types* of persons and will be able to keep them. It will not lose its *sergeant types* either. In fact, the *sergeant type* of leader will be much happier since problems will be dealt with. Loyal and truthful leaders will ensure that the Church will be prepared to meet the One who declared Himself to be the way, *the truth*, and the life.

### **When Loyalty Overcomes Truthfulness**

Loyalty and truthfulness are two covenant values that must be held in tension against one another. *Loyalty binds us together. The truth sets us free.* If one value is emphasized over the other, then serious problems develop and both values will become distorted. If loyalty is overemphasized, then only affirmation will be given and heard as feedback. If truth telling is practiced without love and without loyalty, it does not build but tears down. If truthfulness is considered a fundamental component of loyalty, then the organization will be built on integrity.

If loyalty is considered a fundamental component of truthfulness, then the organization will have true unity.

Often in an organization, whether it is the local church, a business, a denomination, or a fellowship of churches, loyalty becomes the overriding value and begins to overcome truthfulness. This is often revealed in private words, actions and attitudes rather than the official position of the organization. The leaders of an organization may say that they value truthfulness but reveal in their actions that this is not really so. There are several predictable results when this happens:

### **Truth-Tellers are Unappreciated.**

Individuals who strongly value honesty and truthfulness are unappreciated, and often rejected as disloyal. Some people are particularly oriented to truthfulness and may be seen as not being *team players* by those who highly value loyalty. This may create a value conflict in the organization between the truth-tellers and those who highly prize loyalty. The loyalty value normally wins over truthfulness in these kinds of situations because those in authority will often value loyalty over truthfulness.

When the loyalty value wins over truth, it often takes the form of a suppression of free expression, particularly dissent. This does not make the elements of truth in dissent go away; truth will surface again and again in different, even more destructive forms, until it is dealt with properly. This is precisely why political tyrants are unable to completely silence free expression and why they feel the need to silence it. The truth will find a way to express itself simply because it is the truth and God stands behind it.

### **Unintentional Training of Subordinates**

Every time loyalty wins over truthfulness, loyal individuals are unintentionally trained by the leadership to hide the truth or to put an organizational *spin* on it. Truthful individuals are trained that they are not really welcome. Perceptions are created that success and promotion in the organization comes by telling the leadership what they want to hear rather than the truth. Loyal *yes men* can seem to become valued over those who have strong individual integrity and truthfulness.

### **Maintenance of a False Righteousness**

The loyalty-based local church or any organization can defend its righteousness at a high cost to the reputation of individuals. Often the organization fails to deal with its failures in a scriptural way. Instead the organization may blame its failures on the person it failed, even unfairly damaging the person's reputation. The truth is

sacrificed to the need of the organization to maintain a false appearance of not making any serious mistakes. Organizational problems are defended when they are brought to light by distorting the truth by putting an organizational *spin* on it. In contrast, the balancing value of truth persuades all Kingdom organizations to repent, confess their failures, fix their problems and seek forgiveness of the persons that they failed. When failures are handled in a godly way, grace, forgiveness and mercy flow into relationships and healing occurs. When the organization defends its failures at the cost of the reputation of individuals, then it becomes a *revolving door* type of organization.

### **Revolving Door Organizations**

Weakness in the value of truthfulness produces a *revolving door* type of organization over a period of time. Individuals come into the organization, then after perceiving the truth, they try to adjust the organization or adjust to the organization. Often after becoming disillusioned by the reality, they leave the organization. Those who do stay long-term within the organization may also prize loyalty above truth. However, because problems are hidden and often neglected, they create hidden turmoil and strife for these people as well. Hidden disunity becomes a way of life for the loyal members of the organization. They tolerate each other for the sake of the organization. Only open conflict is considered disunity after a time.

### **Key Leaders in Crisis**

The *revolving door* organization becomes a *house of cards* over a period of time because of hidden problems and disunity. A key leader may have a profound dealing from the Spirit of Truth and wake up to the seriousness of the organization's hidden problems. This can create a destructive crisis between leaders as a key leader begins to speak the truth in a loyalty-based organization. Truth must be highly valued or the integrity of an organization becomes weakened and cannot maintain its membership. Loyalty alone cannot keep an organization together. Truth will always be necessary for long-term success.

### **Reputation Saturation Points**

The reputation of the organization will begin to suffer for failure to listen to the truth. Many people will come through the *revolving door* over a period of time. They will know the details of the problems of the organization and the organization's capacity to hide or to put a *spin* on them. They may have become embittered by the organization sacrificing their reputations to maintain its own. The organizational growth stops and begins a long and steady decline because of reaching a *reputation saturation point* with many people speaking badly about the

organization's treatment of individuals and failure to deal with problems. The loyalty-based organization, however, will be blind to the real reasons for its decline. This is because it has few truth-tellers anymore. Its spiritual eyes have been dishonored and are now gone. It will offer alternative explanations and shift the blame once again.

### **Sincere Relationships in the Church**

The concept of *sincerity* may be the best blend of the values of loyalty and truthfulness. A sincere person is a person who out of loyalty to God and others speaks the truth without mixture. The word *sincere* comes from the Latin word *sincerus*. It literally means *without wax*. This word comes from the time when the Romans were building great buildings using marble columns to support the weight of these monumental buildings. The builders would go to the marble cutters in the quarries and inspect the columns. The cutters would put wax in the cracks of columns to make them deceptively appear to be solid in order to sell them. The builders could only use the *sincere* columns to build with. The columns that were what they appeared to be, that were actually solid, without wax hiding cracks, were the only thing that would sustain the weight of the building. If a builder built a building using a column that lacked *sincerity*, the entire building could fall down. The parallels are evident. The Spirit of Truth needs *sincere* people to build the Church; people that value loyalty and truthfulness in harmony with each other.

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