

Light and Darkness in a Violent Context: Johannine Dualism and the Ethics of Christian Resistance to Banditry in Nigeria

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Abstract

Banditry in Nigeria has created a persistent crisis of violence, fear, displacement, and vulnerability, particularly in rural communities across the Middle Belt and adjoining regions. For Christian communities, the crisis raises a difficult ethical question: how can believers resist destructive violence and protect vulnerable life without becoming agents of revenge or reproducing the very violence they oppose? This article examines Johannine light–darkness language as a theological resource for constructing an ethic of Christian resistance. Through qualitative theological and exegetical analysis, the study reads selected passages in the Fourth Gospel alongside Johannine scholarship and Christian ethical discussions of violence, self-defense, nonviolence, political responsibility, and resistance. Particular attention is given to John 1:4–5, 3:19–21, 8:12, 10:10, 13:34–35, 14:6, and 18:10–11, with contextual dialogue with recent scholarship on banditry in Nigeria. The article argues that Johannine dualism should not be understood as a symmetrical conflict between two equal cosmic powers. Rather, light and darkness function as morally and theologically charged contrasts in which life, truth, love, and faithful witness confront destructive practices. The study therefore proposes an ethic of active but non-retaliatory Christian resistance: protecting vulnerable life, telling the truth about violence, resisting injustice, supporting legitimate public responsibility, rejecting revenge and collective punishment, and pursuing restoration without reproducing violence.

Keywords: Johannine Dualism; Light and Darkness; Christian Ethics; Resistance; Banditry; Nigeria; Self-Defense; Violence.

1. Introduction

Banditry has become a persistent security and humanitarian problem in Nigeria, particularly in parts of the Middle Belt and northwestern regions. Its manifestations include kidnapping, killing, attacks on villages, destruction of homes and farms, extortion, cattle rustling, displacement, and disruption of ordinary community life. Beyond immediate physical harm, repeated attacks generate fear and uncertainty that affect movement, farming, education, worship, livelihoods, and relationships. The problem is therefore not only a security challenge but also an ethical and theological one.

Two inadequate responses can emerge in prolonged insecurity. The first is passive resignation, in which Christian commitment to peace is interpreted as an obligation to remain inactive even when vulnerable people are exposed to serious harm. The second is retaliatory violence, in which legitimate anger at injustice becomes revenge, collective punishment, indiscriminate violence, or hatred. A Christian ethic must find a way between these extremes. It must take protection of life seriously without allowing resistance to become a mirror image of the violence it opposes.

The Gospel of John provides a significant theological resource through its contrasts between light and darkness, life and death, truth and falsehood, and faithful witness and rejection of divine revelation. John 1:4–5 presents life in the Word as light and declares that darkness does not overcome it. John

3:19–21 associates darkness with evil deeds that resist exposure and light with truth. John 8:12 presents Jesus as the light of the world, while John 10:10 names the thief who comes to steal, kill, and destroy in contrast to the abundant life Christ brings. John 18:10–11 places an important limit on violent resistance when Jesus rejects Peter's use of the sword.

Methodologically, the article employs qualitative theological and exegetical analysis. It combines close reading of selected Johannine texts with critical engagement with Johannine scholarship and Christian ethical literature on violence, resistance, self-defense, and political responsibility. These insights are then brought into contextual dialogue with recent research on Nigerian banditry, fear, displacement, and community vulnerability.

Existing Nigerian theological literature on Christian responses to violence draws predominantly on the Sermon on the Mount, Pauline ethics, or general biblical peace theology; it does not, to date, engage the Fourth Gospel's distinctive light–darkness idiom as an organizing category for Christian resistance. This article's contribution is to bring that Johannine epistemology of exposure and concealment into direct conversation with the specific phenomenology of banditry, a crime substantially defined by its dependence on secrecy, nocturnal concealment, and the silence fear imposes on victims.

The article argues that Johannine light–darkness theology can support an ethic of active but non-retaliatory Christian resistance. Such resistance protects vulnerable life, exposes injustice, rejects revenge, supports legitimate public responsibility, pursues restoration, and refuses to reproduce the violence it opposes.

2. Conceptualising Johannine Dualism

The Gospel of John repeatedly communicates its theology through sharp contrasts. Among the most prominent are light and darkness, life and death, truth and falsehood, above and below, belief and unbelief, and the community of Jesus and the world. These contrasts have often been described as Johannine dualism. Yet the term must be used carefully. Johannine dualism should not be reduced to two equal and independent cosmic powers in permanent conflict.

John 1:5 provides a decisive starting point: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” The relationship is therefore asymmetrical. Frey (2018) shows that Johannine dualistic language operates in interconnected cosmological, ethical, revelatory, and communal dimensions. Estes (2020), however, questions whether “dualism” always adequately captures the Johannine pattern and argues that the language can sometimes be better understood as paradox.

Within John, light is associated with revelation, life, truth, and disclosure of human conduct. Darkness is associated with resistance to revelation, destructive conduct, falsehood, and rejection of life. John 3:19–21 is particularly important because it connects darkness with deeds that do not wish to be exposed.

For this study, Johannine dualism functions as a theological-ethical framework rather than a doctrine of symmetrical cosmic conflict. In the context of banditry, darkness must never be mapped onto an entire ethnic, religious, regional, or social population. It should instead describe destructive actions, unjust structures, deception, violence, and practices that threaten vulnerable life. This distinction is ethically essential where violent conflict can produce collective stereotypes and retaliatory narratives.

This caution is not abstract. Public discourse on Middle Belt violence is itself sharply divided: some Christian advocacy networks describe the crisis as a religiously targeted campaign that the Nigerian state deliberately mislabels as generic “banditry” (Pan-African Catholic Theology and Pastoral Network, 2026), while other analysts argue that the violence is substantially criminal, economic, and inter-ethnic in character, noting that bandit attacks in the northwest frequently pit Fulani herders against fellow Muslim Hausa communities (Al Jazeera, 2025). A Johannine ethic of resistance cannot and does not adjudicate this empirical and political dispute. What it insists upon, on strictly theological grounds, is that whichever account proves more accurate for a given attack, the category of darkness names the concealed and destructive deed, never the ascribed identity of an entire ethnic or religious community.

The significance of Johannine dualism for Christian resistance lies in its joining of moral discernment with hope. Christians recognize destructive realities honestly while remaining convinced that darkness

does not have the final word. The Christian community therefore resists darkness not by becoming another form of darkness, but by embodying light through truth, life, love, and faithful witness.

3. Light, Darkness, Life and Truth in the Fourth Gospel

John 1:4–5 establishes one of the Gospel's foundational theological patterns: life is in the Word, and that life is the light of humanity. The light shines in darkness, yet darkness does not overcome it. Light is therefore connected to life itself, providing a theological basis for taking preservation of vulnerable human life seriously.

John 3:19–21 develops the moral dimension of the light–darkness contrast. People may prefer darkness because their deeds are evil, whereas those who practise truth come to the light. The text connects revelation with accountability. Applied to banditry, Christian communities should resist narratives that conceal violence, minimize victims, justify abuse, or distort responsibility. John 8:12 identifies Jesus as the light of the world and connects following him with the light of life. The metaphor therefore becomes a question of discipleship: Christians respond to darkness by following Jesus rather than simply seeking to defeat an enemy.

John 10:10 contributes another dimension through Jesus' contrast between the thief, whose purpose is "to steal and kill and destroy," and himself, who comes "that they may have life and have it abundantly." Read diagnostically rather than as a leadership manual, this verse supplies a name for banditry's own character: a destructive force whose telos is precisely theft, killing, and the unmaking of communal life, standing in direct opposition to the abundant life Christ brings.

The full ethical development of the Good Shepherd discourse (John 10:1–18) as a framework for Christian leadership and protective responsibility is treated at length elsewhere (Hassan, forthcoming, "The Johannine Shepherd Ethic Framework"); the present study draws on it only for this narrower diagnostic purpose and turns instead to John 18 for its own account of the boundary on resistance.

John 14:6 joins truth and life in the person of Jesus. John 13:34–35 likewise places love at the center of Christian identity. Christian opposition to violence therefore cannot become hatred of whole populations.

John 18:10–11 provides a necessary counterbalance to John 10. When Peter uses a sword, Jesus orders him to put it away. The narrative does not answer every modern question concerning self-defense, but it clearly rejects uncontrolled violence as the means by which Jesus' mission is advanced. Byers (2023) argues that the Johannine account is particularly useful for thinking about nonviolent resistance because it challenges violence both in the exercise of power and in resistance to power.

Taken together, these passages form a coherent theological pattern. Light confronts darkness; life confronts destruction; truth confronts falsehood; love confronts hatred; and faithful witness confronts injustice. Yet none requires Christians to reproduce the violence they oppose.

4. Diagnosing Darkness, Bounding Resistance: John 10:10 and John 18

The combination of John 10:10 and John 18 is especially important for developing a Christian ethic of resistance. John 10:10 names what banditry is by contrasting the thief who comes "to steal and kill and destroy" with the abundant life Christ brings, while John 18 places a clear limit on how that destructive force may rightly be opposed. Read together, the two texts challenge both passive resignation and revenge.

The Johannine naming of banditry as a work of the thief forecloses one tempting misreading of Christian nonviolence: that enduring harm passively is itself a form of faithfulness. If theft, killing, and destruction are what darkness does, a theology that asks victims simply to endure it mistakes resignation for discipleship. Christian leaders should not romanticize suffering or treat victimization as evidence that believers must simply endure harm without seeking protection.

Christian protection must be distinguished from retaliation. Protection seeks to prevent or limit harm; retaliation seeks to inflict suffering because harm has already occurred. Grounded in the Johannine conviction that darkness depends on concealment (John 3:19–21), churches can encourage vigilance, mutual aid, early-warning networks, lawful reporting, emergency assistance, safe evacuation, pastoral support, and advocacy for effective public protection which is a practices that bring threat into the open rather than allowing it to operate unseen and without turning any of these measures into instruments of revenge. (The Good Shepherd discourse of John 10:1–18 develops a fuller biblical

ethic of proactive protective leadership in its own right; see Hassan, forthcoming, "The Johannine Shepherd Ethic Framework," for that treatment.)

John 18:10–11 provides the strongest narrative boundary. Peter draws the sword and strikes the high priest's servant, but Jesus commands him to put it away. The passage cannot simply be transformed into a comprehensive theory of modern self-defense. Nevertheless, it demonstrates that violent resistance is not automatically justified merely because the cause appears righteous. The manner of resistance matters.

Byers (2023) highlights this feature of John 18 within a broader Johannine challenge to violent power. Jesus does not accept the logic that violent opposition is justified simply because one is resisting an unjust situation. His resistance is active, truthful, and courageous, but it does not depend on retaliatory violence.

The thief-diagnosis of John 10:10 and the sword-rejection of John 18:10–11 therefore belong together. The former prevents Christian nonviolence from being mistaken for indifference to threatened life. The latter prevents Christian resistance from collapsing into retaliation. Together they support protective, non-retaliatory resistance: courageous enough to confront danger, disciplined enough to reject revenge, and faithful enough to preserve Christian witness.

5. Christian Ethical Approaches to Violence and Resistance

Christian ethical reflection on violence provides important resources for interpreting the Johannine material. Augustine's account of peace and rightly ordered love emphasizes that the Christian response to disorder cannot be governed by private vengeance (Augustine, 1998).

Thomas Aquinas gives a developed account of legitimate self-defense. His treatment distinguishes preservation of life from the intention to kill and emphasizes proportionality. Although the Thomistic framework arises from a different historical setting, its distinction between protecting life and intending destruction remains relevant.

Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism takes seriously power, conflict, human sinfulness, and political responsibility. His work helps prevent Christian resistance from becoming detached from the realities of violent insecurity. Yet Johannine theology also requires restraint: confronting evil must not mean adopting the same moral logic as the violent actor.

John Howard Yoder develops a Christ-centered account of Christian nonviolence. The church is called to embody an alternative moral community rather than reproduce coercive patterns (Yoder, 1994). Stanley Hauerwas similarly emphasizes Christian character and the church's responsibility to become a community capable of truthful and nonviolent witness (Hauerwas, 1983).

Oliver O'Donovan contributes an emphasis on political authority and social order. Governments have responsibilities to maintain public order and protect citizens. Churches therefore have legitimate reasons to call public authorities to account, cooperate lawfully with security institutions, and advocate for vulnerable communities (O'Donovan, 1996).

These approaches are not identical. Augustine and Aquinas leave more room for morally justified force than Yoder and Hauerwas. Niebuhr emphasizes political realism, while Johannine ethics emphasizes witness, truth, life, love, and rejection of revenge. Their value lies in dialogue among these perspectives.

A Johannine ethic can therefore be summarized through protection of vulnerable life, rejection of revenge, moral restraint, truthful witness, responsible engagement with legitimate authority, and preservation of Christian identity.

6. Banditry in Nigeria: Violence, Fear and the Crisis of Protection

Banditry in Nigeria is not a single uniform phenomenon. It includes rural violence such as kidnapping, cattle rustling, armed attacks, extortion, killing, destruction of property, and forced movement of communities. Thompson (2025) assembled a large dataset of recorded attacks and identified patterns showing the geographic and operational breadth of the phenomenon.

Amadi and Ugwu (2025) examine armed banditry in North-Central Nigeria through state fragility, greed, grievance, and local context. Their analysis illustrates why explanations that reduce banditry to one cause are inadequate. Banditry emerges within environments shaped by insecurity, institutional weakness, economic pressures, social grievances, and opportunities for armed predation.

Ejiofor (2025) draws attention to structural violence, dispossession, and destruction of communities in northwestern Nigeria. Olomitutu and Ojakorotu (2026) likewise focus on relocation of rural communities in North-Central Nigeria, showing how insecurity can produce movement away from homes and productive land.

Fear is a major consequence. Repeated attacks can change how communities use farmland, travel, educate children, conduct worship, and interact with neighbors. Fear can weaken collective resilience by encouraging isolation and reducing confidence in institutions. Research on education and rural insecurity similarly demonstrates effects extending beyond immediate victims (Ojewale, 2024).

The crisis of protection also raises questions about public responsibility. Madueke (2025) examines why the Nigerian police struggle to tackle banditry, while Irabor and Awofeso (2025) analyze government responses. These studies help explain why communities may experience a gap between formal state responsibility and lived insecurity.

Christian communities cannot ignore threats to life, yet failure of public protection does not automatically authorize revenge or indiscriminate vigilantism. Johannine theology calls Christians to confront darkness through life, truth, love, and witness rather than through reproduction of darkness.

7. Toward a Johannine Ethics of Christian Resistance

A Johannine ethic of Christian resistance can be developed through interconnected principles. These do not constitute a security doctrine but provide theological and moral criteria for evaluating Christian responses to violent insecurity.

7.1 Resistance as Protection of Life

John 10:10 places life at the center of Jesus' mission by naming the thief's opposite purpose: to steal, kill, and destroy. Christian resistance begins with refusal to treat human life as expendable, and with refusal to mistake passive endurance of that destruction for faithfulness. Protection can include community vigilance, early-warning systems, mutual assistance, lawful communication with security agencies, evacuation from imminent danger, emergency relief, and pastoral care. Such measures should be evaluated by whether they reduce harm and preserve life.

7.2 Resistance as Truth-Telling

links light with revelation and truth. John 1:14 presents the Word as full of grace and truth; John 14:6 identifies Jesus with truth; and John 18:37 places Jesus' witness to truth at the center of his encounter with political authority. John 3:19–21 adds the idea that light exposes deeds.

In a context of banditry, truth-telling requires accurate reporting of attacks, honest acknowledgement of victims, rejection of fabricated accusations, and resistance to narratives that conceal or justify violence. False claims about ethnic or religious groups can intensify conflict. Truth becomes resistance because it refuses to allow violence to control the narrative.

7.3 Resistance Without Revenge

John 18:10–11 is central. Peter's use of the sword demonstrates that even a disciple who believes he is defending Jesus can act in a manner Jesus rejects. Byers (2023) shows how the Johannine narrative can be read as a model of resistance that does not depend on retaliatory violence. Resistance should refuse revenge as its governing motive.

7.4 Resistance through Love of Neighbour

John 13:34–35 identifies mutual love as a defining mark of Jesus' disciples. In violent settings, this love includes caring for displaced families, supporting survivors, protecting vulnerable persons, refusing dehumanizing language, and refusing to treat entire populations as enemies because of particular perpetrators.

7.5 Resistance and Legitimate Public Responsibility

Governments and public institutions have responsibilities to protect citizens and maintain order. The church can resist violence through lawful advocacy, public accountability, responsible cooperation, and sustained calls for effective protection. Institutional failure, however, creates temptation toward

private vigilantism. Community capacity should therefore be strengthened while moral boundaries are maintained.

7.6 Resistance as Faithful Witness

John 18:36–37 places Jesus' kingdom and witness within a political confrontation. Jesus does not evade truth, but neither does he establish his kingdom through violent coercion. For the Nigerian Church, faithful witness means advocating for victims, telling the truth about insecurity, providing material and pastoral support, training communities in responsible preparedness, and challenging public authorities to fulfil their responsibilities.

8. Implications for the Nigerian Church

The proposed Johannine ethic has several implications for the Nigerian Church. First, churches need a theology of responsible protection. Teaching on peace should not imply indifference to threatened life.

Second, churches should develop a culture of truthful public witness. Insecurity produces rumors, accusations, and competing narratives. Christian communities can contribute to peace by verifying information, speaking honestly about victims and perpetrators, and resisting language that turns specific acts of violence into permanent hostility toward whole populations.

Third, pastoral ministry must address fear as a serious consequence of violence. Prayer remains central, but pastoral care should also include presence with displaced families, grief support, practical assistance, and community rebuilding.

Fourth, Christian teaching should clearly distinguish resistance from revenge. Believers may oppose violence, demand justice, organize for safety, and call authorities to account without adopting hatred or collective punishment.

Finally, the church should engage public authorities responsibly. It should neither abandon the state nor surrender its prophetic responsibility to hold public institutions accountable.

9. Conclusion

Banditry in Nigeria presents the church with a profound theological and ethical challenge. The problem is not simply how Christians should survive violence, but how they should resist destructive violence without allowing fear, hatred, and revenge to reshape Christian identity.

The Gospel of John does not present light and darkness as equal cosmic powers. Light is associated with life, truth, revelation, and faithful witness, while darkness represents opposition to these realities. John 10 and John 18 together offer an important ethical balance: naming banditry as the thief who steals, kills, and destroys (John 10:10) calls Christians to protect vulnerable people rather than mistake endurance for faithfulness, while Jesus' rejection of Peter's sword (John 18:10–11) establishes a boundary against retaliatory violence.

In dialogue with Augustine, Aquinas, Niebuhr, Yoder, Hauerwas, and O'Donovan, the study proposes active but non-retaliatory Christian resistance. Such resistance protects life without revenge, speaks truth without hatred, seeks justice without collective punishment, supports responsible public authority without surrendering prophetic accountability, and offers hope amid fear.

For the Nigerian Church, the challenge is therefore not to choose between passivity and violence. It is to develop faithful resistance that embodies the light it proclaims: confronting darkness while refusing to become darkness.

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