

THE CHURCH MILITANT

When's the last time you encountered that phrase "The Church Militant"? A few decades ago it was in fairly common use. Sadly today, not only is that phrase fading, but also that whole concept no longer attracts the focus it once received. Why is this? And why is this a bad thing? Let's take a look.

Our Identity

The very nature of the Christian faith as revealed in Holy Scripture clearly calls for militance. Not to the exclusion of the Gospel, but in the properly balanced declaration and application of Law *and* Gospel. Not in an arrogant aggression, but in a faithful defence of the faith. Not to brag but to preserve, promote and restore. Not to disturb the peace but to offer and maintain it. Not to disrupt unity but to achieve it.

The language that identifies The Church Militant names only one other church: *The Church Triumphant*. That of course is the saints in heaven. Thus the church on earth, where each of us has our membership now, *is* The Church Militant; that's not some optional aspect of the church; it gets to the very essence of *The Church*; it's our ID card.

But how well do our people know this? How well do our average members realise that they are and need to function as soldiers in our Lord's army? A big problem in the church today is that an alien and illegitimate version of the Christian Church has been invented and presented: The Lethargic Church; the church asleep. We have to wake up. This is not to say that *all* church groups, *all* congregations, *all* pastors, *all* members are asleep and off guard. But too many are. And even those who are living as the Church Militant need constant training and re-training, re-awakening, and reinforcing of this perspective on our Christian life.

Our Militant Training Manual

A key ingredient in this essential exercise is the fact that the Bible, our divine Constitution, is a *very militant* book. This does not deny that the sweet, saving Gospel is the *focus* of God's Word, but along with following that focus we also need to recognise Scripture's attendant militant nature, a militance so necessary in properly teaching, applying, and spreading the Gospel.

Consider the Old Testament's pervasive attacks on idolatry, on falling away from the Lord. Not simply the record of physical battles being fought, but a constant call to spiritual militance against the devil's forces and schemes in heathen cultures and unfortunately among God's chosen people, Israel. But then we get to the New Testament and hear the sweet words of love, comfort and peace from our dear Saviour Jesus, although it is true that Jesus did say such things as: "*You belong to your father the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire... He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God*" (John 8:44 & 47). Or consider His highly-touted Sermon on the Mount. Except for its opening Beatitudes, it's mostly law, militating against error, ignorance, self-righteousness.

How about the rest of the New Testament? Again, amidst its beautiful exposition and application of the Gospel in its epistles, the New Testament also is heavily characterised by militance against false teachings and sinful ways with a militant defence of God's truth, Law and Gospel.

But How About Some Peace?

An all-too-common factor that produces The Lethargic Church is the pervasive desire, both inside and outside of the church, for peace and love, for unity and community. This is in itself not bad, of course, because we need and treasure and properly pursue those precious gifts of our loving God. Living in peace means a break from fighting. It is a time for some R & R. God knows this better than we do; that's why He lovingly provides this for us. Jesus said to His disciples, "*Come with Me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest*" (Mark 6:30).

But rest and peace are *not the whole story*, certainly not the whole Scriptural picture of the church. Today's emphasis on peace and love, unity and community too often prioritise those features *at the expense of* our essential training for *war!* We hear, we believe, and we embrace passages like "*How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!*" (Psalm 133:1). We heartily endorse St. Paul's appeal "*that there may be no divisions among you*" (1 Cor. 1:10). We love to hear comforting words like our Lord Jesus' warm invitation to "*Come to Me, all you who are*

weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). But in that process, we can tend to forget, or become unwilling to consider the other side of things.

"The whole counsel of God" also clearly and frequently emphasises the militant aspect of our Christian life. Many, while knowing and understanding the fights and battle and wars in the church, want to shy away from them, preferring to have the strength needed to get through their own troubles, not strength to go out and fight. While this may be common, it is not Scriptural. The corrective to that approach lies basically in a deeper, stronger knowledge and *appropriation* of God's Word in one's life. Jesus describes the person who builds his house on a rock as one who takes His Word and "*puts it into practice*" (Matthew 7:24). With this approach there'll be a much larger, stronger, and committed army in the church; there will be more of us with the "*spirit of power and love and sound judgment*" (2 Tim. 1:7) that every soldier needs.

We are at War!

We simply can never lose sight of that fact! This key point cannot be an afterthought or a secondary side issue or some kind of option; it's a necessity! "*Christians, rise! for battle arm you*" (Hymn 204). Even if we don't realise this, the enemy surely does. The devil, the world and our sinful nature never stop attacking us with false teachings; with sometimes subtle yet often attractive – though un-Christian – worldly viewpoints and trendy thinking; with personal contentions; with our own human inclinations to spiritual carelessness and laziness; etc. But also sometimes the enemy comes with direct threats to the proclamation and exercise of our faith.

What is our response to this state of war? Pretend that it doesn't exist? It does! Wait for it to go away? It won't! Minimise it one way or another? Dangerous self-deception! Or shall we properly and energetically "*fight the good fight of the faith*" (1 Timothy 6:12)? *We are The Church Militant!* Our church membership includes being drafted into the army. And by definition, soldiers fight - or at least are trained for and ready for battle and are often thus engaged. Militance is our DNA; fighting is unavoidable for all true members. And thus there is a fundamental **urgency** to our lives as members of The Church Militant!

So What's It All About?

But what are we fighting for? What are we fighting against? The battles take various forms at various times, but one key factor generally at issue, directly or indirectly, is **truth**. We fight *for* the truth, we fight *against* errors, lies, deceptions, compromise of the truth and all consequences of these deadly aberrations. We fight for the truth of the Gospel, the truth of the Law; we fight for every true saying in Holy Scripture, especially as they come under attack.

Truth today is not what it used to be, so to speak; the term itself is still used, but its deeper meaning concerning the larger, basic issues of life is at best an open question. "*What is truth!*" we hear Pilate snickering (John 18:38). Truth has become a back issue, a forgotten factor from the past that stirred up so much strife and division. Surely, we don't want to go back to those days! Can't we all just get along?

That common approach so typically fails, on even a practical, secular level because it avoids dealing with *the issues themselves that are causing* the division and conflict. And of course in a world where the very existence of truth is questioned, people are often reluctant to contend for issues where the controversy's existence itself is doubted and often denied. Dealing directly with the issues, the truth, may widen the split, but at least it will clarify the picture and lessen the tensions and suspicions that fester with unaddressed issues.

This all becomes so much more serious and important when it's God's truth, revealed in His Word, that comes into play. That cannot be compromised, but at the same time nothing produces a solid, lasting unity like the work of the Holy Spirit through God's Word of Truth, focusing on Jesus Christ who is *the Way, the Truth, and the Life*.

Yes, there may be fewer people joined in that unity than in a fragile, worldly, wrongly compromised, hoped-for "unity" that prevails only until the next question, the next issue, the next flare-up; but at least it is a genuine, solid, Scriptural unity, and thus God-pleasing and God-blessed. A *shared* militance is so reinforcing!

Should We Avoid Controversies?

The Church Militant becomes The Lethargic Church when there is a pulling back from battles over false doctrine or practice. The blessed, militant posture and commitment to preserve "the Word of God in its truth and purity" against

any attacks on it has been morphing into the “We just preach the Gospel” approach, too often implying “Let’s not get all excited about all those details and issues.” Here too, the fact that the Gospel is the central focus of our message is used to override or even ignore all those directives and cautions about fighting with all we’ve got whenever necessary to preserve from the devil’s lies all the teachings in God’s Word of truth – controversial details as well as central matters.

None of this is to suggest or condone a wrongly contentious spirit! There should be no arguing for the sake of arguing (1 Timothy 6:4-5; Titus 3:9-11). But it is to awaken us to the call to speak up, to stand up for our faith – the Christian faith revealed in Holy Scripture – when it comes under attack, as happens with increasing frequency on so many fronts today. Inactivity easily becomes surrender; and that is not on our Lord’s battle plan for us!

Sometimes matters that come to our attention are dismissed as “merely political.” And surely, we don’t get involved in politics, we don’t mix church and state! But one thing that is too often and too easily lost track of in that argument is that many issues which are labelled as “political” are also spiritual; they have a Scriptural angle; matters such as today’s preposterous gender contortions; the role of women; abortion; homosexuality; euthanasia; evolution vs. creation; etc. But what is so widely operative today is both an unspoken and even a spoken fear of *offending* those whom we are trying to reach by addressing an issue concerning which they may not agree with us, and thus we would lose them. We don’t want to get into controversial points.

That can be a legitimate approach in some situations, but what is too often missed in that thinking is the fact that the children of this world today pretty much disagree by nature with many if not most of the teachings of Scripture; from the issues just listed to basic Law/Gospel, the exclusivity of God’s Word and the Christian faith, and on and on. And our own members as well as those observing us from the outside deserve to, in truth, need to and sometimes expect to hear us specifically address such issues from a Scripture-based position.

Thus by taking a “hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil” approach, trying to avoid controversy with only a minimalistic testimony, we could end up wrongly retreating from the battle lines. The common approach of simply lamenting the increased amount of strife, disagreement, and division in our world – which also spills over into our church family – often solves nothing. The issues that cause this strife must be addressed when possible; clearly discussing instead of casually dismissing these matters is key to alleviating the discord; finding the Scriptural basis for addressing them is a central part of the battle plan. Yes, this key instructive approach can result in open schisms and separations, but at least the air is cleared for a stronger, more peaceful, and productive life among the agreeing groups. And we’ve taken a stand with our Lord and His Word of life! Start with the basics; keep it simple at first.

But if the people to whom we are reaching out with God’s Word are at all engaged with our testimony and teaching, they will ask questions, and very often questions about our position on contemporary issues, those very issues that some try to avoid but that these people are aware of and curious about. Thus in many cases these issues turn out to be unavoidable. We need to “*always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have... with gentleness and respect*” (1 Peter 3:15). We need to be always ready to address these contemporary societal issues from a clear Scriptural position. Which means we ourselves need to be Scripturally clear to start with on these issues that we may prefer not to get involved with. We need to be militant instead of minimalist, even if in a loving and sensitive rather than aggressive manner. We need to show why we don’t echo the world’s views that may sound loving but, upon closer examination, are far from Scriptural.

Expose The Lies

It’s also important to keep in mind that if we or the people we serve become deceived or compromise on these socio-political issues, this paves the way for deception on spiritual/Scriptural matters.

The devil doesn’t concern himself with any separation of church and state, any social/Scriptural distinctions. His lies – and our own vulnerability – are active on both levels. Satan is, after all, “*a liar and the father of lies. When he lies he speaks his native language*” (John 8:44). And he “*masquerades as an angel of light*” (2 Corinthians 11:14). That doesn’t put us at a costume party; rather, it adds extra deceptive danger to our fight.

Satan’s lies are more pervasive than ever. But how well do we address, expose, and refute them with Scripture? In today’s post-Christian and increasingly anti-Christian culture, our people are constantly bombarded – at work, in the media, from Hollywood and the educational establishment, as well as from friends, relatives and acquaintances –

with the devil's lies about sexual issues, evolution, religious freedom (God does not offer it, but ours as Christians on a political level is increasingly threatened), etc., as well as so many wrong ideas about Scripture. And our people are all too prone to swallow these lies, especially if we ourselves don't address such matters clearly and repeatedly to equip our soldiers for the battles they need to fight.

Negative or Positive or Both?

"But we can't be so negative!" True, it's not helpful to be known simply for what we are against. But that fear cannot excuse failing to position ourselves clearly against evil and error – *along with* promoting the wonderful, positive, blessed contrast to all that in a Gospel emphasis. God in His Word is clearly against a lot! Scripture is awash with cautions and warnings about false doctrine, false living, all forms of evil, and of condemnations of those who live that way. Do we think we are somehow exempt from this emphasis? It doesn't work against our Gospel emphasis, but rather makes the Gospel all the more pertinent; more positively applicable and appealing, refreshing and energising!

Offence Or Defence?

It has long been pointed out that the classic presentation of the armour of God in Ephesians 6 describes a primarily defensive use of these weapons. The one weapon in this array that is closest to a use on offence is "*the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God*" (v. 17). That weapon of course is no minor add-on; it's at the heart and core of our battles, our war against Satan and his soldiers. Certainly we are not to use it in a truly offensive way: disturbing, weakening, blocking the faith of others by an insensitive, overly-assertive style, in coldly triumphant arguments, etc. Yet, after all, God's Word is almighty, "*living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow*" (Hebrews 4:12); and it "*will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it*" (Isaiah 55:11). Thus God goes on the offence for us through His Word, breaking down Satan's fortresses of hatred, resistance, and stubborn ignorance with His water of life, His lamp to our feet and light for our path, His truth that sets us free.

So, as soldiers of the Cross, we need to be very familiar and at home with the use of this mighty sword! We must always have the Word of God with us in our hearts, ready for both open discussions as well as sudden, unexpected use when surprise situations develop in our daily lives.

Apologetics

An encouraging indication of an increasing militance in the church is a healthy uptick of late in the use of apologetics: the defence of the faith.

Showing how even human science, logic and history agree with the factual testimony of Scripture, rather than letting unbelievers and sceptics successfully lodge their charges that one has to be an uneducated, naïve simpleton to accept Biblical testimony!

Groups like *Creation Research* and *Answers in Genesis* and other faithful groups and individuals are letting their militant voices be heard amid the din of cynical ridicule of God's holy, saving Word of truth and life. True, apologetics is not in itself a means of grace, but it is a valuable and vital bulwark against error.

And we need to use this bulwark aggressively and defensively while we still can without dire consequences! Jesus tells us that "*the night is coming when no one can work.*" Our current socio-political climate shows that night on the near horizon; so let's work "*as long as it is still day*"! (John 9:4)

That Great Cloud of Witnesses

When we focus on these concerns and cautions, omissions and corrections, we dare not miss the fact that in spite of human failings and weaknesses, The Church Militant from its beginnings has left us plenty of positive examples of bearing its soldierly testimony – to the people of ages past and recorded by the Holy Spirit for us today yet also. Jesus Himself took a firm and very prominent stand against the false teachings and ideas of His day, and of course paid for this testimony with His life – for us! All 12 disciples, except for Judas and John, also paid with their lives for

their fearless testimony to the truth. St. Paul likely finished his apostleship in prison because of his steadfast witness to the Gospel truth.

Then there's that "*great cloud of witnesses*" in Hebrews 11, and we read there of the severe suffering and torment some of them endured rather than give up the fight and retreat in their battling for God's truth; see especially verses 35-40.

In more modern times, not too long ago we passed the 500th anniversary of a major militant moment: "*Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me! Amen.*" Each year we observe this special anniversary of that marvellous militance, those stalwart words of Martin Luther before the Diet at Worms on April 18, 1521. What a powerful and awakening stimulus for us to be willing to risk it all, if necessary, rather than compromise or cave on the one thing needful.

What of more recent times? Are we able to remember those who were prepared to stand up for Truth, and have left an everlasting impression in our minds?

Are We Ready?

What will these examples mean for us today as soldiers in The Church Militant? As individual members? As congregations, church bodies? The promise made by our confirmees goes like this: "*I promise to live in the grace of my baptism, to hear God's Word, and to receive the Lord's Supper. I promise as a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church to remain faithful to its teachings as I have learnt them through Luther's Small Catechism.*" With these words they intend to continue steadfast in the confession of God's church, and suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it. Sadly, some have argued that this is an unrealistic and almost hypocritical intention to solicit from our young. No. That would only be true if we haven't properly trained them, haven't explained the absolute importance of their faith in *the* faith, and the need to hold on to it *at all costs!* Confirmation instruction is certainly not "just another class"; it is a military camp; it is life or death training, a matter of ultimate seriousness!

Youth have fought in many wars in the past, and they knew the consequences that stared them in the face! Why can this not be expected from well-trained young Christian soldiers today? To be equipped as soldiers of the cross, our members – youth and adult - need to be well-instructed in doctrinal details. With us, they also need to be aware and alert to the Scriptural issues at play, whatever they may be.

Much of the time at war is not spent being engaged in an actual active battle, but it is time spent in learning and relearning, preparation, scouting, staying prepared and alert. A soldier who knows too little about his country that he is to defend – as well as about the true seriousness of the enemy's threats – will be a reluctant soldier at best and may well go AWOL.

Thus in The Church Militant, our training involves more than just a passive, subconscious awareness of Scripture's basic teachings. It involves an *ongoing knowledge and application of this treasure*. We need an awareness of and preparation for the threats against it. We need a deep appreciation of the supreme value of what must be defended.

In short, we need to "*contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints*" (Jude 3). God grant that to His church today!