

Christianity – a Militant Religion

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Introduction

Various circumstances have combined in recent years to put the term *militant* in bad company in the minds of many. Radical and lawless left-wing political groups that provoke and engage in behavior causing personal injury and destruction of private property are rightly labeled “militant.” Their violent antics have caused many sane folk to shrink from anything that resembles such temperament. Political liberals in our nation’s capital and in the media have for several years been falsely influencing our citizenry to conceive of a strong national defense force as some sort of ill-begotten imperialistic “militancy.” The re-emergence of Islam as a militant and terrorist force against Western nations of late has caused many to shrink from any positive concept of Biblical militancy, even in spiritual matters.

The simple meaning of *militant*, however, is to be “vigorously active, aggressive, or combative” (*Random House College Dictionary*). *Militant* and *military* are both “neutral” words, inherently neither good nor evil. The existence of “good warfare” (1 Tim. 1:18) implies the existence of its opposite. Therefore, the respective virtue or vice connoted by these terms depends completely upon that to which they are applied.

The Scriptures imply God-ordained enforcement agents of some sort that will punish those who are evil and protect law-abiding citizens (Rom. 13:1-5; 1 Pet. 2:13-14). Such agents include both police forces (to maintain domestic order) and military forces (to defend nations against hostile forces). Both police and military powers have for centuries been prostituted by wicked and militant tyrants in order to broaden and maintain their own political power. All such efforts illustrate evil militancy. Likewise, the radical elements mentioned earlier are unquestionably militant, but in destructive causes.

While God’s servant shrinks from the horrors of misplaced militancy and misused military, let us not be too quick to discard these terms in their legitimate connotations. (It is never proper to use the abuse of a word or a principle as a reason to discard or abandon the word or principle itself.) Only those who are totally ignorant of the content of the New Testament could possibly be unaware of the frequency with which the inspired writers employ military metaphors. These are designed, apparently, not only to teach its readers valuable

lessons about the nature of the kingdom and its work, but also to motivate us to be militant in the service of Christ with courage and valor.

We Are Soldiers and We Are at War

As Epaphroditus (Phi. 2:25), Timothy (2 Tim. 2:3), Archippus (Phi. 2), and Paul were soldiers of Christ, so are we. The Christian is not promised a life free of conflict filled with ease and comfort. Contrariwise, the Bible says we are at war:

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh (for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but mighty before God to the casting down of strongholds) (2 Cor. 10:3-4).

Although the Lord's kingdom does not "war according to the flesh" and we do not use physical weapons against the enemies of Christ, Paul declares that the "normal" environment in which the church operates is a war zone.

Real Soldiers Suffer for the Cause

No soldier can know at the time of enlistment what experiences or perils he will face. He may be sent on a mission under sealed orders, learning only when he reaches his destination that his task is life-threatening. However, loyalty to his enlistment oath – to obey his commander-in-chief and to defend his country – will motivate him to execute his orders at whatever cost.

Likewise, no soldier of Christ can foresee what all he may be called upon to bear for his Lord, but bear it he must. That decision should have been made at the time he confessed Christ as the Son of God and as his Lord (Rom. 10:9-10) and then "enlisted" by being baptized into Christ (6:3-4). Jesus describes persecutions and other sacrifices made for Him as a "cross" that each of us must bear if we would faithfully follow Him: "Whosoever doth not bear his own cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27; cf. 9:23). A "good soldier of Christ Jesus" will suffer hardship rather than retreat under enemy fire or compromise with evil and error (2 Tim. 2:3).

Soldiers in the armies of men must devote their full attention to their service. No soldier who is truly serving his commander "...entangleth himself in the affairs of this life; that he may please him who enrolled him as a soldier" (v. 4). Soldiers on duty or in battle must not allow non-military pursuits to distract them from pleasing their commanders.

Jesus' soldiers must remember that they are "on duty" all of the time. The Lord's army is weak and struggling in many areas of the battlefield because the service of the troops is occasional

and irregular. They have allowed the “care of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches” (Mat. 13:22) to entangle and distract them so that they no longer seek more than anything else to please Him Who enrolled them and to place the interests of His kingdom first (6:33).

We Know Who the Enemy Is

The Bible specifies the commander-in-chief of the enemy forces on the great battlefield of life. Satan, the devil, the arch-adversary, leads this awful onslaught against Truth and righteousness. He would destroy every soul eternally if he had his way. He stalks his prey, requiring our constant vigilance: “Be sober, be watchful: your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour, whom withstand stedfast in your faith...” (1 Pet. 5:9). He disguises himself and thereby deceives the undiscerning masses: “For even Satan fashioneth himself into an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14). The devil is crafty and clever; we must ever be aware of and stand against his “wiles” (Eph. 6:11).

Satan employs men in his despicable assaults (Paul identified Elymas as “a son of the devil” [Acts 13:8–10]). The devil uses “fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1 Pet. 2:11). However, our real warfare is “...not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12).

The Lord Provides Our Equipment

An army can be no better than its equipment, both for defending itself and for attacking the enemy. Jesus Christ, our Commander-in-Chief (Mat. 28:18; Col. 1:18; 1 Tim. 6:14–16), has equipped His army well. He provides armor for our protection. This armor is identified generally with “light” and with “righteousness” (Rom 13:12; 2 Cor. 6:7). The spiritual soldier who will be able to “withstand in the evil day” is he who has put on “the whole armor of God” (Eph. 6:13), as Paul itemizes:

Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; withal taking up the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation... (Eph. 6:14–17a).

But let us, since we are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet, the hope of salvation (1 The. 5:8).

The commander-in-chief of an army does not personally buckle the armor on each of his soldiers. Each soldier is provided with equipment for battle, and it is **his responsibility** alone to

utilize it. So it is in God's spiritual army. Although He has the ability to do so, God does not directly, immediately, and/or personally put armor on His soldiers, though some among us would have it so. Rather, Paul rather tells us that God has **provided** the panoply and it is completely **our responsibility** to utilize it.

All of these pieces of armor are related to and supplied by the inspired Word, which furnishes us completely for every good work, including every tough battle (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The "Word of his [God's] grace" is fully able to edify us and take us to our eternal inheritance (Acts 20:32). It behooves us then to follow the example of the noble Bereans who "searched the scriptures daily" (17:11). We must honor the command of Peter to add **knowledge** to our faith and virtue (2 Pet. 1:5) and to "grow in the grace and knowledge" of the Lord (3:18).

Paul commands that we "**put on** the whole armor of God" and "**take up** the whole armor of God" (Eph. 6:11, 13; cf. 1 The. 5:8; 1 Pet. 4:1; emph. DM). He repeats as he lists them that **we ourselves** are to strap on each piece of armor (Eph. 6:14-17). The only means of putting on this armor is through diligent study and application of the Word of God. Many a soldier has fallen in the daily trench warfare of temptation because ignorance of God's Word left him defenseless against the "fiery darts of the evil one." How badly we all need to remember the perfect defense against temptation and the perfect preventive for sin: "Thy word have I laid up in my heart, That I might not sin against thee" (Psa. 119:11).

Could the apostle's instructions in Ephesians 6:11-17 be his own explanation of the way God will strengthen us "with power through his Spirit in the inward man" (3:16)? Note that he is discussing the means of our attaining spiritual strength in both contexts. In 3:16 he tells us God will give us strength. In 6:11-17 he tells us the **means** by which He gives it – not directly, but indirectly – **through our own utilization of His perfect instructions**.

Although Paul once mentioned our "weapons" (2 Cor. 10:4), when it came time to get specific, he subsumed all of our weapons of spiritual warfare in one great weapon: "And take...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God:" Eph. 6:17. (Noteworthy is the fact that each of the pieces of armor that we are to put on relates directly to the Word of God as its source. Thus, both for defense and for offense, our security rests in the written Word.)

Just as the Holy Spirit does not supernaturally and immediately furnish us with spiritual armor, neither does He give us knowledge apart from our study of His complete and all-sufficient Word. This is our mighty offensive weapon. With it our Commander-in-Chief

withstood Satan and put him to flight in the wilderness temptations (Mat. 4:1-11). “The scripture cannot be broken” (10:35). It cleanses (15:3), sanctifies (17:17), and purifies (1 Pet. 1:22). It is the source of saving faith (John 20:30-31; Rom. 10:17). It is God’s saving power (Rom. 1:16) by which men are spiritually begotten (Jam. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23).

The Lord Jesus did not send His army into the world equipped with literal swords and shields, but with the sword of the Spirit (Mat. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16). Rather than being a dead message from an “unenlightened” distant era, the Spirit’s sword is alive and energetic, and its sharpness surpasses that of the keenest blade men can forge (Heb. 4:12).

Though Spiritual, the War Is Nonetheless Real

We are not participants in mere mock or “practice” battles. The fight is real. With Timothy, we are to “war the good warfare” (1 Tim. 1:18). We are urged to “fight the good fight of the faith,” and we must do so in order to “lay hold on eternal life” (6:12). We are to “resist the devil” so that he will flee from us (Jam. 4:7). If we fail to resist him, we will become part of his war “spoils” (lit., military booty) (Col. 2:8).

Conclusion

Paul, ever one to practice what he preached, could say at the close of his life:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day; and not to me only, but also to all them that have loved his appearing (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

May we all so serve and fight as faithful soldiers of Christ that we can sincerely say these words when the time comes to lay down our armor.

[**Note:** This MS originally appeared in a slightly different form as an “Editorial Perspective” in *The Gospel Journal*, January 2004, of which I was editor at the time. DM]

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