

The Battle for Souls

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Christian Life | *The Sword & Trowel*

2005, no.2

YEARS AGO WE USED TO SAY that we are 'saved to serve', but that little maxim is out of fashion today. It is, however, biblical and right. This article is intended as a call to the tremendous work of the great commission of Christ to his disciples in every age – the gathering in of lost souls. At first sight this topic may not seem to relate to the personal spiritual life, but a believer whose mind and heart is not engaged in Christ's cause cannot expect to make personal spiritual progress, for did not the Lord say, 'Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.' Also, he said, 'I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit' (*John 15.8, 16*). It is for this cause saved people are left in the world, and the purpose of all spiritual strength and experience is to equip us for the work.

The battle for souls is a topic which should grip the minds and hearts of all Christians, unless we have become cold and self-contented in spirit. The question behind this chapter is: Do we reflect the martial language of evangelism in the New Testament, and see ourselves as being on a war footing for the souls of men and women? Do we resemble our forebears, especially those of the early church, or of times of reformation and awakening, or any other period of strong church growth?

Tragically, it must be said that reformed Christians today do not often appear to be engaged in a battle for souls. In churches that believe the doctrines of grace it is all too rare for distinctive, dedicated, persuasive evangelistic messages to be heard, and to find really serious labour on the part of church members to reach neighbourhoods. The result of this has been a steady decline of congregations, so that now panic has set in, many reformed churches turning cap-in-hand to the 'seeker-sensitive' churches and saying – in effect – 'Show us how to revive our churches; show us your contemporary praise culture and worship songs. Let us incorporate these into our worship.' Well-known reformed figures are leading the way into a new world. For years they have been ultra-Puritans, and suddenly they have become like charismatics. The power of panic is remarkable.

In the following paragraphs we shall draw encouragement from a number of Bible passages using the language of warfare as a figure for winning the lost to Christ. This, we believe, is the missing factor among many reformed believers. Making soulwinning a central theme will restore vitality and purpose to personal spiritual lives.

Warfare is about militant advance; the prosecution of a vigorous, unrelenting campaign to take territory. Lacking this driving determination, pivotal and historic conflicts have been lost, such as in 1940, when Italy came into the war on the side of Germany. Mussolini spoke haughtily of initiating a 'drive to the Nile', and sent a massive force of five heavily-equipped divisions to the border of Egypt, which was defended by British and Indian troops. The Italian commander, Marshal Graziani, gave the order to this huge force to move forward. The Allies, having little more than two divisions at their disposal, were heavily outnumbered, while in the air the Italians had a five-to-one superiority over the RAF.

General Richard O'Connor, the British commander, was puzzled when the Italian army, having rolled forward 50 miles, suddenly stopped. Reconnaissance officers crept forward and saw through their binoculars an astonishing sight. Hundreds of Italian engineers and labourers were busy digging in and erecting long-term fortifications, even laying a great pipeline for water. One lieutenant radioed back – 'It looks as though they have settled here for ever.' The drive to the Nile had ground to a halt.

General O'Connor was eager to strike, and moved quickly. Early in the morning, as the sun came up, British and Indian forces attacked with maximum impact, finding all the Italians in bed except

sentries, and the cooks preparing breakfast. The battle lasted under two days, Allied tanks and infantry prevailing with ease. More than 20,000 Italian soldiers were taken prisoner, along with (as the war historians love to tell us) countless bottles of wine and mountains of spaghetti.

What was the problem that halted the Italian offensive? It was their commander, Marshal Graziani. He would not fight. He moved his enormous army forward, vacillated and dug in, and it cost him, ultimately, his entire army.

How like our British constituency of reformed churches this is! We have fellowships throughout the land equipped with the Word of God and the great doctrines of the faith. We have an abundance of food (fine sermons preached in our pulpits), a superb heritage of example (in our history), and we look after our troops (church members), but so many of our churches are not moving. Where is the thirst for victory? Where is the evangelistic endeavour? How similar we are to a stationary army, and yet we are supposed to be the 'church militant'. The warfare illustration has tremendous suggestive power for the stance and vigour of Bible-believing churches, and we naturally want to know how prominent this theme is in the Bible. After all, if it is set forth as a standard for us, we are bound to be shaped by it, both as individuals and churches.

The martial texts of the New Testament apply to the work of the ministry in general and to evangelism in particular. If we can show that this is so, then as believers we are bound to strive with 'military' zeal in the reaching of souls. *1 Corinthians 9.7*, for example, employs battle language to describe ministers, Paul saying, 'Who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges?' We know that the warfare here includes soulwinning because Paul mentions planting a vineyard, an obvious figure for evangelism. In *2 Corinthians 5.18-20* and *6.4-10* Paul lists the rigours which commend a person serving in the ministry of reconciliation, mentioning various actions, and saying – 'By the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left'. This refers to a Roman soldier with his shield in one hand and his attacking sword in the other. Does this resemble our evangelistic stance today?

In *2 Corinthians 10.3-5* the apostle uses very remarkable language: 'For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (for the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) . . . bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.'

These words may properly be applied to the believer's battle for holiness, but they are intended to apply even more to the battle for souls. Paul is actually defending himself against those who said he was not an apostle, but to do this he mentions the great principles of militant evangelism to which he was committed.

In *1 Timothy 6.12* Paul says to Timothy: 'Fight the good fight of faith.' Is he referring to personal holiness or evangelism? Obviously both, because Timothy received a two-part charge in these epistles, firstly to promote sound doctrine, and secondly to do the work of an evangelist. We are to see both ministries as a battle, and conduct them with great effort.

The language of military action continues in *2 Timothy 2.3-4* – 'Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier.' We know that Paul is thinking of evangelism as well as preaching to the saints because he immediately speaks of enduring 'all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus'.

What could be more martial than the picture of Christ in *Revelation 6.2*: 'And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.' Here, surely, is the battle for souls illustrated under the direction and leadership of Christ himself.

The longest warfare passage in the epistles is in *Ephesians 6*, beginning – 'Put on the whole armour of God.' Much of the armour is defensive, and clearly represents the believer's struggle against temptations, trials, and attacks that are made on the Truth. However, the offensive sword,

the Word of God, is also there, and Paul proceeds to appeal for prayer that he may open his mouth boldly to make known the Gospel as ‘an ambassador in bonds’.

We see in *Ephesians 6* the fourfold battle of the Christian church: *the battle for the Truth* (to educate God’s people and to defend the faith); *the battle for holiness* (‘having on the breastplate of righteousness’); *the battle for assurance* (‘taking the shield of faith’ to ‘quench all the fiery darts of the wicked’); and *the battle for souls* (having ‘your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace’). The last of these is certainly not the least, but of prime importance, because it comes first in the great commission given by the Lord. All these activities are described using the language of warfare.

Commendably, the *battle for Truth* is taken very seriously by most reformed preachers today, because we stand for the Reformation, and for the great 17th-century reformed confessions with their remarkable statements of biblical doctrine. Everywhere reformed pastors seek to teach the doctrines with sincerity and diligence.

The *battle for holiness* is also urged by numerous reformed preachers. Godly living and the mortification of sin by the power and help of the Spirit is strongly set forth in numerous pulpits. Does not the reformed tradition have its Puritans with their great expertise in presenting the standards and methods of holiness? We are inevitably concerned to promote and apply these.

The *battle for assurance* received renewed attention from the 1950s, when the notable Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones and others focused minds once again on Satan’s offensive to take away the believer’s joy and peace in believing, and how he should be countered. It is vital that these three aspects of the spiritual warfare continue to receive constant and careful attention, but what about the battle for souls? Without doubt, this is the one which has faltered and failed during our ‘watch’, and so much so that there often appears to be no battle at all.

We know well that there are ministers and workers struggling against the trend, and their labours must be acknowledged, but since the 1950s evangelism has been the weakest theatre of war for reformed churches in Britain. Generally speaking, we no longer thrill to the language of Bishop Ryle, who would speak of attacking the strongholds of Satan to rescue perishing souls, and of hunting the fox of unbelief to its lair. Martial language has become an embarrassment.

Dare I mention another military analogy, this time from the American Civil War? At the outset, the Confederate army in the south had fairly bleak prospects against the superior Union forces, but then there was the strange, strange case of General George McClellan. It is said that if this general had speedily marched his huge army of 168,000 men south and taken Richmond (the Confederate States’ capital) there might have been an early end to the war. McClellan was the man of the hour, a wealthy former railway chief who exuded decision and authority. When they painted his picture he struck a perfect Napoleonic stance, even with his hand in his coat. His manual on the art of war was essential reading for officers.

In the winter of 1861-2 his was the best supplied and best fed army ever seen in America, chickens and equipment in abundance arriving in wagons every hour. The trouble was not the availability of recruits and provisions, but the celebrated general. He just wouldn’t move. He fussed and hesitated for months, while Abraham Lincoln paced his Washington study in exasperation saying, ‘What have we got to do to get him to fight? Why won’t he go forward?’ Despite a three-to-one majority of troop numbers, McClellan repeatedly appealed for reinforcements and additional supplies, having convinced himself the enemy were far more powerful than they were (or ever could have been). Eventually he did move forward and mount attacks, but these were all too little too late, and much blood shed on both sides accomplished nothing. As a result the noble general went further into his shell until relieved of his command.

Is this not just like our reformed scene? As we mentioned in the case of our earlier military illustration, we are so well equipped, having the Word of God together with many able preachers, and

people willing to operate Sunday Schools and visit homes if only churches would organise such activities, yet little or nothing is attempted. We wonder if the angels in Heaven look down and say, 'What have we got to do to get these British reformed Christians to fight? They do not seem interested in the battle for souls.'

We rightly have our obligation and concern for the other theatres of war we have listed, but why not for soulwinning? In this respect we have nothing in common with the Reformers, the Puritans, the preachers of the golden age of Baptist church expansion, the Victorian pulpit, the likes of Whitefield, Carey, Spurgeon and so many others of the reformed school. We have preachers who believe in the free offer of the Gospel, but hardly ever proclaim it. They are mainline Calvinists in theory, but hyper-Calvinists in methodology, for their level of Gospel activity is often no greater.

We have reformed churches with no children's Sunday Schools, no active community visitation, no stress on the necessity of a serving church membership, and no evangelistic preaching. But this is not authentic, historic reformed Christianity. It is something abnormal, and we need to recognise this. Today, maintaining the army takes up all the attention of reformed preachers and writers, while the *purpose* of the army has been all but forgotten. Endless reformed conferences and publications exclusively emphasise other departments of the Christian warfare, seemingly unaware that modern British Calvinism has by this omission become disfigured and unsound. As a result, individual believers in many churches have forgotten how to serve the Lord in a corporate way. Are we among them? Do we need to stir ourselves to action?

Earlier in this article we asserted that war requires *advance*, and a vigorous prosecution of that aim. If we may add another observation, it is the need for an *intelligent strategy* in warfare. In the battle for souls we need to apply our minds to how we may reach our community, thinking about children, young people and adults.

Unsound church-growth authors have suggested many novel plans, most of which are unbiblical and misguided. Popular ideas today include the abandonment of challenging preaching, the stifling of any mention of sin, the constant use of drama as the premier mode of communication, and the emphasising of worldly entertainment-style music. As we have noted, we are amazed to see these methods favourably considered by some reformed churches that turn in panic to superficiality.

In our reformed circles, however, we often have no strategy or battle-plan at all. In fact, some seem to have the idea that if we hold to the doctrines of grace, it is unsavoury to have campaign objectives of any kind. Some say that the only strategy for soulwinning is to promote holy living among believers, and a very beautiful phrase has come into vogue, namely – 'We believe in the evangelism of holy living.' Of course we do, but the way the phrase is often used really means, 'We believe in doing nothing.'

Certainly, the gracious lives of Christian people will attract others, but this is only a part of the battle for souls. Nevertheless, some churches have closed their Sunday Schools and given up the arduous business of running weeknight activities for young people. They have also abandoned the visiting of the community, and similar outreach activities, making the evangelism of holy living an excuse for being at ease in Zion.

Some kind of outline plan or policy is vital for every church, and it is clearly implied by the warfare analogy. Can we imagine a nation being at war without any plan or objectives? There are no end of matters that demand a great deal of thinking. If our location is poor for Sunday School work, perhaps we need to hire a school where the children live. We may be thankful to God we have a good building for the church, but if it is no good for the children, we will need to begin a branch. This is warfare thinking, but it is seldom seen today. There were numerous branches of churches and Sunday Schools years ago. Roland Hill at the old Surrey Chapel (a whole generation before Spurgeon) had thirteen branch Sunday Schools because he did not think much of the location and social image of the chapel for that purpose.

This is what the battle for souls is about. Fighting a war involves an entire army with its divisions, brigades and battalions, down to the companies and the platoons, and all have to be deployed in a co-ordinated way. This is like the labours in old-time authentic Calvinistic congregations. Does our church think in terms of reaching all levels of society, and using all the abilities of the membership in that task?

Another rather obvious observation about the warfare analogy of the New Testament is the enormous amount of *sacrificial activity* implied. War demands utmost commitment even in unreasonable conditions. If the command comes that a mission must be undertaken at midnight, the troops may not decline on the grounds that it is time to sleep. The military analogy points to inconvenience, difficulty and hardship. Is this the ethos in our churches, and the kind of situation we happily accept as individuals? A pastor was telling me that a plea for pianists for a weeknight children's meeting fell on deaf ears, despite the presence of many able pianists in that church. One after the other they declined because they had something else to do, or because their comfortable routine would be disturbed.

As a boy I once had an English master (actually a Welshman) who, at twenty-one, had been a junior officer in the First World War. He told of how he volunteered at the outbreak of war with twenty or so other young men who had been at university together. They had just started their careers, but felt they should serve their country, knowing it might mean loss of life or limb. There is a very famous documentary film clip of a boyish 2nd lieutenant nervously pacing to and fro in a trench, then waving his pistol and leading his men 'over the top', out of the trench. Such junior officers were so often the first to be cut down by enemy fire, and my English teacher was the only one among his friends to return from the war. They knew the risks, but they were ready to volunteer for king and country. Yet here are we today, children of the eternal King, called to a spiritual warfare, and yet so few will come forward to regular service in many churches. We have lost sight of the effort and injury of the war analogy, with all its sacrifice, cancelled home leave, and crawling about for days on frozen ground or in flooded trenches. The far more comfortable rigours of regular Christian service are unthinkable for so many reformed Christians.

I have known a number of people who had to move to a new location and a new church, where they observed there was no Sunday School. These were nice churches, with a good ministry and dear people who gave the new members warm encouragement when they wished to begin Sunday Schools. People said, 'What you are doing is wonderful and we are so grateful to you. We are with you in this.' And no doubt they were faithful in prayer, but (and this is a situation I have heard from a number of people) no one ever lifted a finger to help in a practical way.

Just recently I met a couple who went from the Tabernacle to a provincial town nearly 25 years ago, and since then have faithfully operated a Sunday School in a sizeable reformed church of good reputation. But after all this time, when they go away on holiday, the School has to close because they have no helpers. What is wrong in our churches, whereby, when the Lord gives them a zealous couple who get down to work, they provide no challenge or training to others to join with them in the battle for souls? Is such spiritual indifference to the work of the Gospel authentic Calvinism? Of course not.

We should reflect the spirit of *Acts 20.16*, where the apostle Paul rushes to Jerusalem to take advantage of the Day of Pentecost, and the greatly swollen population of the city – people who could be reached with the Gospel. Where is the hunger for conversion today, apart from a desire for revival, when, it is hoped, God will do all the work for us?

Sometimes churches recoil from the battle because the enemy is considered to be unbeatable. Yet another military example occurs to us from World War II. How tragic it was when Britain lost Singapore in 1942! It was very difficult to defend Malaya, and so four British divisions retreated into Singapore, crossing the causeway and attempting to destroy it behind them. Eventually the

Japanese invaded Singapore, taking the British by surprise by approaching from an unexpected direction. Within seven days General Percival had surrendered the British and Commonwealth forces, losing 9,000 in the battle, and sending into captivity 100,000 British and Commonwealth troops. Many authorities have called this the most humiliating defeat in the history of the British Army. In addition, 25,000 Chinese males between 18 and 60 were summarily executed by the Japanese. The British POWs went into abject slavery, most of them in Burma working on the railway.

Why did they surrender? It was because they thought the Japanese were far stronger than was the case. Afterwards it emerged that Japanese supplies were stretched to breaking point, so that they had only one or two weeks' fighting in them. But they were thought to be far stronger. Poor General Percival got the blame. He was by all accounts a gentleman, who had evidently wanted to follow Churchill's order to fight to the last drop of blood, but he proved weak before his fellow commanders and subordinated himself to their desire to surrender. It was all because they thought the enemy was unbeatable. Is this why we will not fight in the battle for souls today?

Do we look at the walls of atheism, and at the power of the media and the entertainment world, and retreat into our shells thinking the great commission can no longer be carried out? Accordingly the fight of faith today is fought in the arenas of truth, holiness, and the maintenance of assurance, but not in the battle for souls. May I say it again, that viewed in the light of our forebears reformed Christians today are a strangely lopsided entity. We are not like our forebears. We do not have the fervour or the urgency. We do not have the soulwinning priority. If only we would recognise this, we could begin to move forward once again. But the final word must be: what about ourselves as individuals? Do we see ourselves as those saved to serve? A true spirituality, a genuine personal spiritual life, means wholehearted commitment or dedication to the Lord's service, and to the souls of lost men, women and children. The supreme task of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, on earth, was to secure salvation. Ours is to make it known. This is our calling, our purpose, our joy, and our reward.