

People of God, this past week I had the honor and blessing of being at the CREC Triennial Council. And the theme of the Council this year was Fight the Good Fight. Since it is fresh on my mind and it is Reformation Day, I wanted to share my thoughts with you about the Church Militant.

We use two categories when referring to the church – the Church Militant is the church that is on earth, fighting the good fight of faith, and the Church Triumphant is the designation given to those whose rest is won, and who are now in Heaven, Victorious over sin, death, and Satan.

The Lord Jesus referred to the Church as being Militant the first time he used the word Church in the Gospel of Matthew 16 when He said,

¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

I like the way the old RSV translation has it – *on this rock I will build my church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.*

Jesus Christ envisions his Church as assaulting and laying siege against the powers of death, both in the underworld, and those on earth. The Gospel proclamation that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God, which is the rock upon which Christ builds his church, is the power of God unto salvation to those who were once dead and asleep in the graves, shackled fast and bound by sin and death.

But when Christ died and was buried in the grave, he entered the strongholds of Death itself, and released from death's strong bands those OT saints who were waiting for the Lord of Life to come and deliver them. And He did. And as we say in the liturgy, *When he ascended on high he led captivity captive.*

Christ bound the strong man, and entered into his house, and plundered his goods, and took those who belonged to God out of the tomb and

raised them up to life everlasting, forgiving them of their sins, and made them members of the Church triumphant. Those are the powers of death in the grave – the gates of Hades that could not prevail against the Church.

The rock upon which Christ builds his church is that powerful and life giving announcement from Heaven that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God. This very announcement, when heralded by God's people, and when lived out in the world brings us into conflict with the powers of death that are still in the world.

And why would it not? The light has entered into the world, and men loved darkness more than light. And so they try to snuff out the light where it is found. Some snuff it out because their deeds are evil and they do not want the light of Christ to shine forth to reveal their sinfulness, and make them feel guilty in the light of His righteousness.

Some people are deluded in thinking that they are righteous, but they seek to establish their own righteousness through their own causes and ideologies, and they think they are doing good in the world. And yet, because they have been blinded by their sin and the devil they have no idea that they are in fact fighting against God. They think we Christians are the enemies of mankind, and that by persecuting us they are doing it in service to God.

In either case, we need to understand and keep it firm in our minds that the Church is Militant, and the True Gospel of Christ which proclaims the Lordship of Christ, is the battering ram which is knocking down the gates of death in the world.

One of the problems that we need to steer clear from is ecclesiastical pacifism. Ecclesiastical just means church. Instead of opposing error, many churches tolerate it, and think that disagreeing and drawing strong lines of distinction is divisive.

Instead of church leaders drawing the lines where God draws the lines, they attempt to appease those who secretly bring in destructive heresies into the church, and they end up turning true churches into synagogues of Satan. The preaching of the pure Gospel of Christ gets transformed into liberal nonsense of tolerance and acceptance for everything God calls sin, and it perverts the true social justice which God would have us to really establish in the world.

Ecclesiastical pacifism leads men to be at peace with sin and error, but to be at wars with those in the church who rightly fight against those sins and errors. Unity is promoted above all else, unity and love and tolerance and peace, and the first victim to be sacrificed for the sake of unity is Truth. But the Church Militant cannot be at peace with sin and destructive heresies, for the Church is the Pillar and Ground of the Truth.

Men of integrity and courage are needed in the church to help purify and reform the church. And but whenever God raises up such men, they are soon ousted as disturbers of the peace of Zion. Like Martin Luther. Now, concerning these reformers allow me to say a word of warning.

Now it does need to be acknowledged that sometimes there are self styled reformers - people care more about making a name for themselves than they do for actually serving their church. These people find errors where little to none exist, they pick fights and disrupt the genuine godly unity of the church in truth, for the sake of their own causes. These people who rightly understand the church to be militant, always reforming, but for whatever reason, they confuse their foolish ideas for true genuine reformation and set their aim at the faithful brethren. John Frame referred to those in the reformed world who do this as Machen's Warrior children. They are always looking for a fight, even where none exists, and they cause much disruption with the churches. Their end is, most times, to be cast out. Not every is to be a reformer, and not everyone is your

enemy. Before you do proceed to take up theological arms against the church, the Bride of Christ, you better be quite certain that you have the truth and the those you disagree with are in grave error. For if yo rush headlong into battle against the church of Jesus Christ, you will find yourself fighting against the Lord himself. And like Mr. T – I pity the fool.

Now, there are those like John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, and Martin Luther, who were genuine, and who tried to reform the church from within, but were only met hostility and violence. Many others also fought the good fight of faith within the church seeking her reformation, and died in the process, some even being killed by her leaders. The Church therefore, when presented with the truth was not humble enough to receive it at times, and so expelled from her midst those who held to the truth.

And so, because Militancy is of the essence of the Church, fighting the good fight can some times lead to friendly fire. We want to minimize that as much as possible, and that helps when we know who we are to fighting against, first and foremost.

We are to be fighting against the sin, the world, the flesh and the devil. When a Church ceases to be militant against sin, the world, the flesh, and Devil, it then ceases to be a true church of Jesus Christ. Because Militancy is of the essence of Church. The Church on earth is glorious, not in spite of her Militancy, but precisely because of it. A Truly Militant Church stands opposed to the world both outside of its walls, and inside of her walls. In the world, and in her members. When the Church is militant, it proves that while the church is in the world, it is not of the world. The Church's militancy demonstrates that there will always be enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. The children of God and the children of the devil are never at peace with each other, and never should be. This is important to remember as so many people who call themselves Christians today think that absolute highest virtue is to be tolerant and kind. But whenever the devil uses such rhetoric that seeks to

bring peace or at least a cease fire between the kingdom of Christ and Satan, through words like tolerance and love and kindness, you can be absolutely certain Satan has no desire whatsoever to be at peace with the Church. In fact, this is his subtle ways of attacking. Right as he speaks words of peace to you, he slips in the dagger. The Devil prowls about as a roaring lion seek some to devour. He never ceases to fight against the truth, he never ceases to destroy the church. And he always will use Christian words to do it. So we must always be on guard.

The antithesis between Christ and the Devil, between Truth and Error, between holiness and sin, is absolute. And the antithesis is active, not passive. These are not set in opposition to each other as black and white pieces on a chess board. These are not like heads or tails on a coin. These are against one another like the quenching waters are seeking to squelch a raging fire. As the Puritan John Owen said, "Either you are killing sin, or sin is killing you." Some folks say peace, peace, but there is no peace between Christ the Devil, the truth and lies.

But we should not be foolish here to think that because these are in opposition to one another that these are like the two sides of the force in Star Wars, equally balanced and but forever at odds with one another. Not at all. Satan is a created being, and God is the Creator. Jesus Christ bound the strong man. Darkness gives way to light. Christ is victorious. The Church is prevailing and will always prevail. The Church can never be destroyed. The Gates of Hell, the powers of Death, cannot prevail against the Church. Yes the Serpent did bruise Christ's heel, but Christ has crushed the serpents head. We are victorious in this battle because Christ now has won and victory and has the keys to death and Hades, and has been exalted above all power.

The power by which Christ subdues all peoples to himself and defeats the powers of death, the gates of hell, is the word of God. Rev. 19 shows us a symbolic image of the church age. This is not the end of the world, this is

a symbolic image of what Christ is doing all through History. Christ is riding on white horse, and his robe is dipped in blood, either his or the blood of his enemies. And the name by which he is called is the Word of God.

The armies of heaven are following him. And that's us, the church. We also are arrayed in fine white linen, white and pure, because we have been baptized. And from Christ's mouth comes a sharp sword, perhaps it is the double edged sword which is the word of God, which would make sense since it comes from his mouth. And with it he will strike down the nations.

This tells us people of God, that the preaching of the word of God by his preachers is the weapon that Christ – THE Word of God – uses to defeat his enemies. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 10 - ¹³For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” ¹⁴How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe (in) him (of) whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear (the context is, hear Him) without someone preaching? The implication here is that that Christ himself speaks in the Gospel proclamation by a preacher. Christ himself speaks through His preachers.

And when the Christ is preached by the preacher, and people hear the living word of God, God's word does not come back void, rather it always accomplishes its purpose. Whether to bring repentance, increase faith, hope, and love, and thus saves people, or it hardens hearts further.

The preaching of the word of God that is based upon Peter's rock solid confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God, this message is the power of God unto salvation – the dynamite of God. The explosive militancy of the Word of God to save sinners in the preaching of the word of God through the church's preachers is the main weapon that God uses to defeat his enemies.

The Scripture uses the image of the rider on the white horse, whose name is the Word of God, and he has a sword coming out of his mouth, and he is followed by the army of heaven. This is the image Scripture uses to describe the church militant. But the church has found other images besides this one, and one such image is seeing the church as a ship.

In fact, many Churches are specifically designed using nautical design and language. For example, in many churches when you look up and see the vaulted ceiling it looks like the ribs of a ship. The section in which the people sit, is called the Nave. The term *nave* is from *navis*, the [Latin](#) word for *ship*.

I was in the Navy and I find this image helpful. The Church is a ship. I encourage you to read chapter 8 of Moby Dick where Melville describes the pulpit of Whaleman's Chapel, and describes how it was designed to look like the bow of a ship. After he describes it in great detail, he says this –

“What could be more full of meaning? – for the pulpit is ever the this earth's foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world. From thence it is the storm of God's quick wrath is first descried, and the bow must bear the earliest brunt. From thence it is the God of breezes fair or foul is first invoked for favorable winds. Yes, the world's a ship on its passage, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow.”

Indeed the Church is a ship, but not just any ship. She is not a cargo ship. No, the Church is a warship. She is a Man of War, decked out with Cannons and propelled by the sails. The Holy Scriptures are the Chart and Compass by which we navigate to the New Jerusalem. The Wind of the Spirit blows in her sails and she fires her cannons against her enemies, the wicked Sea Serpent Leviathan, as the Word of God is preached in truth and in the power of the Spirit.

And thus people of God, my fair shipmates, we cannot seek to be peace with the world when we come aboard this holy vessel. When we set sail,

we sail to victory. The Church is a warship and her worship is her chief act of warfare. The Lord Jesus is the Admiral of His Fleet, Pastors are Captains, Elders are Executive Officers, And you, the laity are the ships company. We all have a job to do. And while we are at war, while we are fighting the good fight in this worship service, let us be reminded that we need all hands on deck. We are at battle stations, and we need to keep in fighting shape, so that with Christ we can participate in the victory. Amen.

The Church is a warship, and her worship is warfare. And the if the preaching of the word is likened to the cannons blasting, we might not understand the place of the Lord's Supper. It is simple really, after the battle is won, we celebrate the victory feast. After We Fight, we Feast. This is the natural end, the two go together. And so as we wage war against the sin, the world, the flesh, and the devil in our service today, we anticipate the final victory of the end, even right now in the middle of History. The Church all through her history is fighting, until at last she enters into the rest of the Church Triumphant and partakes of the victory feast with them. We live out that pattern even now, so that by communion with the Lord and with those who have gone before us, we would continue to fight the good fight, until we come at last to our rest, with them. And so, this gives us great cause to lift up your hearts.