

THE BATTLE

Apart from our worry and anxiety, this world is a very intriguing place where the Lord has put us to learn and grow. So many different patterns and motifs surround us. My life is caught up in the church, and all things are understood in the light of the faith that drives it. I tend to see everything that happens in the light of what impact it may have upon the church. But others have different scenarios in their minds, and even church people are sharply divided between those who feel that the church is the identity and context of their whole lives, and those who see the church as a possible enhancement of other, more important areas or purposes in life.

I remember a time many years ago when the Salvation Army was struggling with whether or not to give up its uniforms. Baby boomers still had some respect for the Salvation Army because it matched its faith with deeds, but baby boomers did not like uniforms. Some leaders in the Salvation Army were afraid that giving up their uniforms would destroy so much tradition and so much of the symbol meanings of the movement that the probable influx of new members would not make up for the loss. Others said that if it did not do something to attract more people at that time, all would be lost anyway. But what if the next wave *liked* uniforms or there was a sudden change in perspective? While these were difficult and maybe crucial issues facing the Salvation Army, most of us went whole weeks at a time without even thinking about them. It was not the context in which we lived.

However, somewhere in every business, organization, and enterprise, people are studying, pondering, and trying to make decisions in this fast-changing world that will keep their business or product or service or organization viable and healthy. Some people do not care what happens to the Salvation Army. Some people say that it tries to minister to down-and-outers but only scratches the surface, and that Alcoholics Anonymous is what really transforms lives and moves people out of the gutters of our world. Others are concerned about overpopulation or the ecology or social justice or the future of public education and spend little time concerned about AA or the Salvation Army.

And so it goes. In theory, everything is connected to everything else. We like that realization when we think of nature, and we hate it when we think of society or our own private affairs. And maybe we suspect that a lot of people just bury themselves in sports or hobbies

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or their own private lives so they will not have to wrestle very much with the larger sweep of life going on all around them. And what has any of this got to do with Jesus?

One church is gung-ho about “Open and Affirming,” another is deeply involved in foreign missions, a third thinks that personal evangelism is the most important thing, a fourth sees everything it does in terms of getting more members, and a fifth thinks that the children are all that really matter. Just this week, a nearby UCC Minister stopped by to suggest that we should consider sending money and support and people to help his church with their important ministries, since we are rich and lazy and couldn’t have anything very important to do here. I don’t think he even knew how his remarks sounded to my ears. He was only aware of his own context.

Ultimately it depends on what you think the BATTLE is, doesn’t it? That is my first point. There is no such thing as objective reality when it comes to making decisions or living your life. What do you think the BATTLE is? Some of you will not like that particular word, of course, because of your own context. Then what do you think the “larger purpose” is?

What if the BATTLE is overpopulation? Or limited economic resources? Or God’s rights over human life? You see, our perspective depends on what we think the BATTLE is. And if you and I do not see the same BATTLE, then we can argue over every issue forever and never come to a common conclusion (except by sheer accident), never have any true communication, never be able to work together for a common purpose. That is what goes wrong in some marriages: the couple fight forever because they have never tried to agree about what the real BATTLE is.

I was talking to an acquaintance the other day. We were getting nowhere. He was interested in the spiritual path but was frustrated because he felt stymied and could not seem to get on with it. He had invited the conversation, but when I tried to talk about Jesus or the church, nothing connected. (I talk a lot with some of you, and I forget what it’s like in the real world.) Finally I woke up. Jesus was a shut-down for him. I do not mean he did not like Jesus; that I would have spotted instantly. But the Lord of Life, who (in my experience) is endless adventure, expansion, and challenge; who is interested in everything and everyone; who is always calling us “out” and “beyond” our little borders – this same Jesus, in the mind of my friend, was an

incredibly developed spiritual person and maybe even the Son of God, but Jesus lived in this little box from long ago and was only interested in people who wanted to live and talk in the lifestyle of people from Protestant churches in small Midwestern towns in the 1930s.

This is not a joke. When I talked about Jesus or the Christian Life, this person did not hear me talking about finding true identity, discovering vocatio, or awakening to dimensions of LIFE far larger than he had ever experienced before. He “heard” me talking about closing off and shutting down, memorizing Bible verses, and sitting with his hands folded on his lap, so to speak. And “church” did not mean community or friends or learning and growing and striving together. To him it was a dry and boring institution that went through certain motions endlessly for no other reason than to go through certain motions endlessly.

As long as we did not recognize that we were using the same words for entirely different – in fact opposite – meanings, it was a frustrating conversation. He was getting more and more annoyed with me because he thought I wanted to shut down his life and put him into a narrow, safe little box where all he did was hand out bulletins, take up offerings, and spend a lot of time refraining from moral indiscretions.

What is the BATTLE? After all these years of arguing, studying, praying, giving, and working together, are you and I fighting the same BATTLE? Are you fighting the same BATTLE as those sitting around you here? Naturally we are not all doing the *same thing* about the BATTLE; that would make us very ineffectual. Being individual members of the body of Christ, we are supposed to have different gifts and various functions, and we do not all get the same orders from our Commander at the same time. That would mean no real BATTLE and no real Commander. But are we even fighting the *same* BATTLE?

Some of you think my battle is with fundamentalists, but that is only a side skirmish. Fundamentalists throw people off, including many of you, so I try to clarify some of those issues from time to time. Some of you think the battle is feeding the hungry or defending the oppressed. Those are also side skirmishes. When the Lord puts opportunities in front of us, which is nearly always, to one degree or another, we do engage in these skirmishes. They are always other dimensions of the larger BATTLE.

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Sometimes I think whole churches, or at least whole groups within Christendom, are able to serve fairly well without ever understanding the real BATTLE because they engage in a side skirmish so effectively that the Holy Spirit is able to use it and coordinate it within the larger picture. Just so, if a few of you see the importance of educating our children in the Christian Life and you give your energy and talents into that effort, then that is a wonderful boon, from my perspective, even if you do not see the real BATTLE. But if the majority of you sees nurturing children as the purpose of the church itself, then *that* becomes the BATTLE (the larger purpose) around here, and we are no longer in the real BATTLE.

Off and on this fall, I will be working to bring the BATTLE into clearer focus for us. Some of you have only seen glimmers of it; some of you have been tempted off of it; some of you have wandered off. I need your help now. We need each other if we are to be faithful through this next phase of our life together. If you do not know where you are or what you are doing as a member of Christ at this particular time, it would be an excellent idea to stop whatever you are saying or doing and get your bearings from the Holy Spirit before proceeding. We are in a phase of great opportunity and considerable change, and that always means there is also the risk of dissension and the danger of getting into fights with each other that will throw us for a loss – precisely when we need to be holding steady in the real BATTLE and making the advances that are set before us.

I have gone to the Book of Revelation because it speaks directly about the BATTLE. Using Revelation puts extra strain on all of us because, though some of you have studied it together, most people in liberal churches pretend that Revelation is no longer in the Bible. It is not as familiar to many as other biblical books are. Most people in literalist/fundamentalist churches love Revelation but reverse most of its meaning or try to use it as a predictive tool, and that turns many people off. I will not get into that part very much, except to beg or urge you to give it a fresh hearing.

We start out, in this morning's passage, remembering how fortunate and blessed we are because we are invited to the Marriage Feast of the Lamb. Despite the BATTLE and despite whatever is going on that is hard in your life or in mine, I need to hear that and breathe a great sigh of relief – and after that, offer a sincere prayer of gratitude. Fortunate and blessed, indeed! The passage cuts in at the very tail end of the celebration, but the whole first half of the nineteenth chapter

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is John reminding us of the joy and celebration of our future in the Kingdom so that we do not get our present sufferings out of perspective or quail at the BATTLE we are in. Whew! Nice to get that straight again.

Now we see that Heaven has opened up and the rider of the white horse has come to fight the BATTLE on earth, and there is no question that He will win this BATTLE. He has special names and titles that I will not go into, except to say that it is made absolutely clear (which is necessary in a book full of such dramatic symbolism) that this is the Christ Jesus. He did come. He is here. And this BATTLE being described is the BATTLE He came to fight from first to last – and it is the one we find ourselves in right now, as well.

Among the symbols, two we must notice now: His robe is dipped in blood, and from His mouth comes the sharp sword of the Word – His only weapon. What is Revelation saying? Not what most people expect. It is saying that the only weapon He will ever wield is the MESSAGE – the Word He brings from God. And the only blood He will ever spill is His own.

We go then into this incredible battle scene, a battle representing the real BATTLE going on – past, present, and future – here on earth. And the rider of the white horse is pitted against all the rulers and kingdoms of earth, all the powers of evil – the beast and all who serve the beast: Satan and all who do Satan’s bidding. The armies of Heaven follow after the Christ, but they never engage in this primary battle – the true BATTLE. They cannot. Only one Warrior can fight this incredible host on the level of the true BATTLE, and the only weapon that will be of any use is the weapon of His sword. Not Excalibur; far mightier than that! His WORD – the Message He brings and bears from God: “I love you. I come that you might have LIFE.”

And with that Message, He will slay every foe. The slaughter will be the slaughter of CONVERSION. What else *could* be meant by such symbolism? The death of the old self, the surrender, turning it over – we admitted we were powerless. As that unbelievable Message finally sinks in, ALL will eventually die to self and be born anew – and come forth to new LIFE far greater than we had ever imagined. That is what the real BATTLE is about.

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This is the fearsome battle portrayed in Revelation: one Warrior against all the layers and levels of evil that ever have or ever shall march or crawl upon the earth. The blood flows deep, but the blood is from that one Warrior – the seal and the proof of the WORD He brings; the inevitable cost and consequence of bearing that Message: “I, the Creator of all things, do care and cherish all my children, and my Son/Agent has come to change and save you all.”

It is not the saints against the sinners. Whenever the fight seems to be the saints against the sinners, you know for sure that it is a side skirmish – not the real BATTLE. All who march with Christ have marched against Him. All have felt the bite of that sword. All have learned the hard way that our hatred spills His blood but that He does not spill ours. All have been reconciled. We must never forget that all who are our enemies are only enemies in the minor skirmishes; they are only those who have not yet heard that Word or seen His blood. *He* will change them; we cannot.

So the BATTLE is not about the “haves” versus the “have nots.” That is a side skirmish. The BATTLE is not about inclusive language or gay rights. It is not about Third World powers against developed nations. It is not about oppressors versus the oppressed. All of these, impressive and scary as they are to us – even hunger and disease and racism and ecology and overpopulation – are mere skirmishes in the larger and true BATTLE: Humans against their Creator. Humans trying to live by their own authority. Rebellious humanity living apart from God, as if it did not owe its true and total allegiance to God.

Most of the world, through most of history, has tried to fight the fights the other way around: Feed all the hungry, and then we will love God. Heal all the racial and religious wars, and then we will love God. Get our families strong and loving, and then we can turn to God. Get better systems of government, heal corruption, save the trees and animals – and then we can love God.

Within the fellowship of Christ we call “church,” we are supposed to know that the real BATTLE – inside and out, with ourselves and with all others – is that we run our own lives. We do not yet truly trust God to rule in the decisions by which we live our everyday lives.

The only weapon He uses is the Message of Reconciliation. The only blood He spills is His own. We can tell by the tactics that the BATTLE is bigger than we think. The old self must die.