

Saddened over the Cry for Battle

Steve Argue

Since the last page in YWJ is designed to “Stir it Up,” I’d like to respond to Ron Luce’s “Battle by the Bay.” There is no doubt that Ron Luce’s Teen Mania has poured great amounts of effort into serving teenagers and youth leaders. I do not question Ron’s motives and I am confident we all desire to honor God, follow Jesus, and serve teenagers. I would however, like offer a plea to any ministry who uses war-like language to guide and motivate the teenage community. Here’s why I think so...

A war-like posture is contrary to the way of Jesus. It doesn’t take long to look through most youth ministry magazines to see full-page adds of students wearing fatigues while holding Bibles; or youth ministries using words like “battle,” “war,” “fight,” “taking a stand,” etc., in their promotions. I wonder how a Christian would feel if they saw the “Jihad 2006 Youth Conference” in this magazine or a group of young people wearing fatigues holding the Koran. What if Goths had a rally stating that we are in a “culture war” and that they hoped to “win the battle”? It feels different when you’re on the other end of a battle cry.

If the way of Jesus is about going the extra mile with the oppressor, serving the least of these, praying for our enemies, turning the other cheek, and believing that the peacemakers will be blessed, the war metaphor seems out of place. The Christian “battle,” it seems, is less about militancy and is more about the struggle we all face daily as we stumble toward personal and worldwide shalom. War-like language promotes weapons contrary to the Christian antithesis- the cross.

“Battles” end with winners and losers– which is contrary to a Gospel that welcomes all. Whether it’s in rallies or in our undisciplined language that positions “us” against “them,” Jesus followers should reject actions that promote “battle lines.” If God loves the world and wants all to be saved, let’s teach our teenagers to love and welcome all. Luce comments that those who protested their rally were all “angry,” and “hateful,” and suggests that we can’t let our country be run by “those” who “have no morals.” He states the protesters “lumped all Christians into one group.” I wonder if we Christian leaders are guilty of similar generalizations.

Instead of starting where we disagree, let’s teach our teenagers to start with what we have in common. Don’t we all, as humans, desire love, have fears, struggle with life; have joys, hopes, and dreams? Is the Christian really that different from the “non-Christian” (again, an us-them label)? Apart from God’s grace, what DNA do Christians have that others do not? Let’s stop demonizing our neighbors who hold differing opinions and treating them as enemies who need to be confronted in battle. Instead, let’s find ways to connect with our neighbors, our families, and our classmates. The more difficult path is to pursue and understand people rather than protesting “them.” Coming close is the essence of Jesus’ incarnation.

We protest ideologies, we embrace people. As long as we think that there’s a war going on, we’ll train our teenagers use language as a weapon and people as a commodity. “Things” don’t have a life or context or feelings. Therefore, we can rally, protest, and battle them. Put a face on “those people” and homosexuals (for example) become “my friend Tom,” or “my sister Sarah.” When we put a face on people, we’re compelled to come near rather than protest from far-away. The gospel at a distance is no gospel at all.

Christians need to worry less about domination and more about self-giving love. Luce says that Christians are called to the public square because we’ve let “them” dominate it for far too long. I think it’s time to admit that the Christian church has lost its positional status with earthly powers (governments and political parties) and confess that we’ve craved endorsements from the wrong authorities.

Some seem to want to “get the power back” or “fight the power with power” in the public square. Teenagers must see that embracing the way of Jesus comes through serving our world, living by sacrifice, and demonstrating unconditional love. The Sermon on the Mount takes priority over the public square.

If we think we will win the battle in the public square, I think we’re misguided. The public square is too small and narrow a vision. God desires to bring healing to the whole world I’m convinced that the more Christians engage with God and Jesus’ heartbeat, the more our world will feel closer to God.

Let's confess our own sins and ask a lot more questions before giving "the answer." Regardless of other's tactics, let's be teachable enough to admit that there's an element of truth in anyone's feedback. Maybe those protesting Luce's rally really were treated in hateful ways. Let's grieve with the protesters, confess our sin and ask them for forgiveness. What would happen if we actually asked protestors what Christians might do to make things better rather than just assuming that we know what's best for them? As I read the Gospels, I see Jesus asking a lot more questions than simply giving answers. I think we need to show teenagers that Christians posture themselves humbly, recognizing that no one is all good or all bad. What we do know is that we are all made in the image of God, and we have much to learn from each other.

Is it really a "culture war?"

Luce seems convinced that we're in a "Culture War." We can point fingers or we can ask whether our own war-like language has drawn the lines and instigated the protests.

I wonder if the true battle that Christians face today is the struggle with our own lost identity and us trying to recapture a gospel by force, by power, and by protest. The way of Jesus is meek, loving, quiet, and subversive. His revolution (if we must use this term) is one of love, healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

The greatest casualties may be within our own communities where divorce is higher than the national average, sexual addiction is prevalent, abuse is reported, church splits happen regularly, and a younger generation is leaving the institutional church in search of something real. Maybe we need to look at our own faith communities before we start critiquing others.

Further, wars and battle lines assume overly-simplistic solutions to our very complex world. Should we take a position on pornography, for instance? Of course. But let's also talk about how we'll walk with those damaged by it. Part of "speaking out" is offering a solution. And, let's also "speak out" against materialism, consumerism, addiction to electronics, nationalism, and American imperialism. If we really are going to "take a stand" let's not be selective with our sin of choice.

We fail to communicate an accurate gospel when we use war-like metaphors that contradict the very nature of Jesus. Our role as Jesus-followers isn't to "win" anything. Jesus has already made it possible for all to come to the Father through his sacrificial death, inaugurating God's new heaven and earth through his resurrection. I wonder if we really hope for this or if we secretly delight in being right and proving others wrong. May God give us wisdom and humility as we discern what we're passing along to an impressionable, emerging generation for whom we all care for deeply.

Thanks for letting me add my mix to the "stir" page.

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