

The Church Militant

A BIBLICAL MEDITATION.

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I

NORMALLY the Church does not fight. I was recently talking to two dignitaries of the Church of England and I said, "Your Church possesses a beautiful prayer in the liturgy of the Holy Communion for the Church militant, but where is your Church militant?" They laughed and agreed with me. But when in spite of all that the Church really fights, and it does, even though it may be very seldom, the world is first disappointed and then soon exasperated. It is bound to discover that the Church does not fight to help the world in attaining its so-called high aims, but that it gets drawn into the fight itself, sometimes because it is attacked, sometimes because the Church is trying to save it—and the latter annoys it more than the former.

The reason is that the first assertion of a fighting Church must be, "All of us, you and we alike, are standing under the judgment of God." If the Church normally does not fight, it may be due to worldliness and selfishness, but it is much more often due to the fear of preaching the judgment of God on others and itself. In fact the judgment of God has been the sole means of stirring up the Church to the fight. The judgment of God has been passed on *the world*, and so the Church *ought* to fight. The judgment of God begins at *the house of God* (I Peter iv. 17), and so the Church *must* fight.

The judgment of God is the advent of the Church militant. If the Church of Christ does not witness to God's judgment, it loses itself in the mysteries of God, or even in the secular affairs of the world. In the former case it will perhaps preserve itself for a future fight, even if it has failed in the present one; in the latter case it surrenders itself to and loses its identity in the world, its enemy, which by great

cunning and skill with flattering words has tempted it, led it astray, and ruined it. There are always more hirelings in the Church than wolves (John x.).

The judgment of God calls the Church to the fight. No servant of Christ can fight without this call, and even if he did, it would be no true fight. It is only when *God* calls that the Church becomes the Church militant. But surely God is always calling. Certainly He is, but His call becomes particularly insistent at certain times. A Lutheran teacher of the Church said in 1855, "Longer delays may be granted in other times and to other generations; in our time and to our generation only a short delay and no consideration are granted."

That is why the first assertion of the Church in preaching the judgment of God must be, "The Lord is at hand." This must not be understood in the way the man in the street says it in evil days, e.g., 1919 in Germany, or in London now; to him the answer of the Church should rather be, "The terrors of judgment you are now experiencing are nothing compared to what will be in the last days." But even so such events speak in no doubtful tones. God wants to rob us of all certainty both external and internal. The Church is no life-insurance society, not even where eternal life is concerned.

We give evidence of the holy sobriety of the Church, when we not only preach morality and seek to edify, but also proclaim the nearness of the Lord. The Church so seldom speaks of it because it is sleeping and dreaming, or because it is sleeping and not even dreaming. Is there anything harder than saying the five words, "The Lord is at hand?" Can we say them unless it be out of our knowledge of the judgment of God? So long as we are hardened against the fact of the judgment of God, we shall not awake out of sleep; but "the night is far spent, the day is at hand." Perhaps the ministers of the Church have called often enough, "Watch and pray," but surely it was but the cry of sleepers in their sleep. Not all prayers of the Church have been prayed, when we were awake. However, "now is high time to awake out of sleep." Why? "For now is our salvation nearer than when we first believed." God has put on His clock. He is at hand. "The night is far spent, the day is at hand." The Lord Christ is at hand.

II

That this is so, that God has wakened us, that our salvation has come nearer, that we no longer stand where we stood, when we first believed, is grace and only grace.

Slowly but ever increasingly are we hearing the tremendous NO that God is saying to us and to His whole world. Only those that no longer drink milk can know the abyss of sin. Only those that have long been treading the path of faith can know the abyss of their own and the world's sin. Why have all the Church's saints in later life had to pass through those dark hours, those deep temptations, those terrible struggles of conscience and faith? All believers, awakened by the warning call of divine judgment, grasp the full measure of that judgment but slowly, and little by little. At first we wanted to save something, anything, both in us and in the world, in which after all our dearest also are. But everything is torn away from us. The moment comes, but does not come at once, when he who has arisen out of sleep realizes that he is standing before Nothing—from the human standpoint he is without hope. His only hope—and this is no empty phrase or rhetorical turn of speech—is God and His Saviour. This is not brought about by our being threatened by some outward danger, but by our being wide awake and looking into the depths of judgment. That witness, already quoted, from the year 1855, said, "The Lord lit up as by a lightning-flash, shining from East to West, the abyss before our feet, so that even the short-sighted and the blind could measure its depth and could see what the abyss held. And what have we seen in this abyss? Many thousands upon thousands of souls lost through the fault of the clergy, and above those heads there was written in fiery letters, 'I will demand their blood from your hand.' Still to-day these words stand there to be read, and the abyss is still lit up by the lightnings of the Lord, and the heads of the lost are still to be seen by everyone who does not hold his hands before his eyes and does not refuse God's punishment to his own everlasting destruction."

The disciples of Jesus had looked into this abyss, when the Lord was crucified. That is why before the struggle had broken out, they could with a peace that was not of this world declare war, saying, "Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ

of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by Him doth this man stand here before you whole. This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. Neither is there salvation in any other ; for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved." That was how the apostles spoke, after they had healed the lame man at the gate of the temple. They were able to heal just because they knew that there is but one hope, He the Crucified and Risen one. There was a time, while they were with the Lord in His life time, when they could not heal. The spirits were not subject to them (Matt. x. 19) because they were just beginning to believe and had not yet abandoned all other hope. They had not yet looked into the abyss of the judgment of God, and they had not given up building on the world. They were not yet able to fight, for they slept while the Lord prayed. Do we and the Church of our time stand exactly where the disciples were, when they were with the Lord, and He with them? Do we not possess the Lord of Lords exalted in heaven? Are we not members of His body? Do we not receive our life from the Head through the word and sacraments? Have we not been justified by grace alone? Can we not then fight and be ministers of the Church, which is built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles, and say with them, "Neither is there salvation in any other ; for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved?"

We have the call to the fight. We have not only God's judgments but also the words of the apostles. It is a sign of God's grace that not only what He said directly to His servants is His word, but also what His servants said, i.e., the words of the apostles of Jesus Christ. In them we are given our message, if we will but hear it ; when we have heard it, we believe it ; when we have believed it, we preach it, proclaim it, and testify to it. Verily, to use Luther's saying, our despair should be a "confident despair." What do you want to cling to, you of little faith? The fight is beginning, and you cannot hold on to the peace that is given by this world. You cannot even delay the beginning of the fight. God fixes the hour, not we ; He always declares His own wars. The apostles knew it, when they were still allowed to worship in the temple at Jerusalem in complete

peace alongside Israel, the crucifiers of the Lord. That is why they delivered the message, "Neither is there salvation in any other." So it must be with us. We know there is a fight. We are still allowed to live in peace with our nearest ; state, society and Church are still at peace. We are still in the temple of those that crucified the Lord, and for a very short time we are still worshipping the Lord together with them, but it will be only a very short time. We have already heard the call to the fight ; now we must proclaim it in our turn. We do not desire the fight ; God wills it, and He only wills it because the world does. The world only desires it because it will not surrender, will not accept the judgments of God as a summons to the fight. It says, "No ! no ! no ! never !" It resists God's call with all its pride, and stubbornness.

If war has broken out, who began it ? If asked, men will say, No one. We can answer them, "You are quite right ; it started with God's Word, His Word of condemnation of you and us. But then it was you that wanted the fight—you rejected that Word and crucified It and you will go on crucifying It ; you stumbled on the corner-stone rejected by you, builders. You will not receive Him, when He is among you speaking to you, nor when you have crucified Him and He deals with you from heaven as the crucified one. You do not want to have anything to do with Him at all. It is you who wanted the war ; you are responsible for it. None the less, God is not angry with you, for His anger is already passed. He only asks that you should bow before Him. Bow yourselves in confident despair ; bow yourselves in the only name, in the name of Jesus Christ."

III

"Be sober, be vigilant ; because your adversary, the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour." And "put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. *For* we wrestle 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."

Here it is clearly stated that the war has begun. The transition from peace to war is always very sudden—yester-

day deep peace, to-day already a raging battle. It is even worse in the war of the Church than in the world wars of the nations. Who is the enemy of the Church militant? Four hundred years ago the answer was, the Pope; he was the Antichrist. Last generation said, the Marxist, the Bolshevik; he was the embodiment of Satan in their day. To-day the answer is, the Nazi is Antichrist. There has always been much truth in these judgments. In any case we must never water down our condemnation of the enemy just because we know from the experience of the Church of Christ that the devil knows how to change and can assume many different incarnations. No, never, for we know where the devil sits enthroned to-day. But it is just when we know that, that we must make sure that we make Satan our enemy and not some of his human puppets. It is equally important to realize that whenever we condemn the devil and his servants, the thing that matters is God's judgment of them, the same judgment that concerns us all. All we can do is to explain that the incarnation of Satan at any given time is simply the clearest and most visible embodiment of the evil powers between heaven and earth. And so it must be to-day. The one we wage war with at any given time, and who wages war with us, is one we never really see. We who have lived through the fight of the German Church have a tale we could tell about that.

What sort of a fight was that? We fought against forgers, false teachers, wolves and hirelings, who attacked or betrayed the flock of Christ. Hardly had we driven them back, when the enemy had disappeared, and a new one stood in his place, viz., the political party, the state, with which the Church ought never to have directly to deal. Thus the beaten foe was saved and could recover his strength. We were prevented from following up our victory successfully. A little later there was another change; the political power disappeared, saying sanctimoniously, What have we to do with religion? The defeated foe, the teacher of false doctrines, faced us again refreshed and strengthened. Exactly the same thing happened again and again. So it was we began to grasp what it meant not to fight with flesh and blood. Once we understood this, we began to recognize our true opponent, and we shouted aloud, "We wrestle against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-

rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." That is a completely new experience. Till then the words of the apostle had been merely words. Now they were filled with reality, with suffering, with toil, with hard fighting, with courageous willingness for sacrifice and bravery, with obedience and hardness towards oneself, but also with comradeship, with pain for defeats sustained, with moments of despondency and overwhelming occasions of victorious certainty, with attacks and counter-attacks.

Thus we find ourselves right in the midst of war, and there is real warfare there. Therefore "above all, taking 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, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

That is why we, "old soldiers" of the German confessional fight, say, "We as individuals are extremely unimportant, but we bring you experiences, and they are important."

For the other Churches in other countries the question is first of all, whether they wish to have to do with these experiences. At first they are never ready for that. They may perhaps be interested in "ecclesiastical cannibal stories" (because they have taken place far away), and they may with most exquisite brotherly love care for the wounded in these wars of the Church on distant battle-fields, but they never believe that their own Church could become the battle-field for such a fight or even for similar ones.

The Church militant is never really honoured in the Church itself. The abnormal conditions in which a fighting Church has to live and work are considered to be a good reason for not treating it as "a normal part of the Church universal." We could now tell a tale about that, but we are not going to accuse anyone.

None the less there is one thing we are doing; we are preaching the war with evil spirits under heaven to the whole world. We are teaching all Christendom never to think that we, or some day they, can ever have to do with flesh and blood. We are warning them not to look for flesh and blood even now in the small fights that may come their way. They should forget to consider as important characters and those circumstances in which characters meet in Church matters. Do not concern yourselves with psychology,

through which you only give Satan an enormous advantage, but "stand 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."

Resist! Withstand! The devil does not wait till he is attacked. Whether we wish it or not, the Church begins its fight on the defensive. If we are involved in it, there is at first but one consolation for us; we are not alone, we are not forsaken, we belong to a great people, to the people of God in all lands, and they are fighting the same fight together with us, the fight against the devil, "whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world."

The Church universal in all its branches cannot prevent the Church militant, that abnormal expression of the Church, despised by the other Churches, from being in fact the secret leader of the Church universal; nor can it prevent its finding fellow fighters everywhere, volunteers, to enrol in the fighting Church and fill up the gaps in its ranks as irregulars out of all lands of the cross. The Lord said to Paul in Corinth, "I have much people in this city." Paul could not have known it, but he afterwards found that it was so. When the clergy of the Confessional Church gathered together at the beginning of the fight, they could not venture to hope that one day a fighting Church would stand behind them, yet one day the Church stood there. So it always is with the Church militant. He who has fought for the Lord has never been alone. Even Elijah discovered seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal.

That is how the army of the Church militant grows from small beginnings. The mobilisation of the Christian army for the defence of the sanctuary goes steadily forward in the midst of the fighting and in the midst of the heavy losses which can never be avoided. The Lord Himself fetches His soldiers.

IV

To-day all earnest men of good will complain that we no longer possess the necessary authority for bringing up the young, drawing men together, ordering society, and building up the community. Where is this missing authority to be found, without which all efforts at reconstruction will be useless? It can only be found wherever the Church militant

may be waging its wars. Every earthly army has a morally upbuilding and educative influence. We need only remember the centurion's words to the Lord Jesus about commanding and obeying among soldiers. So in the Church militant, too, there is a real spirit of authority.

Therefore "consider Him that hath endured such gain-saying of sinners against themselves, that ye wax not weary, fainting in your souls. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin." Have we really not striven as yet? Was all that lies behind only child's play? Does the decisive fight still lie before us?

That is the word, DECISION. The Church militant experiences and knows decisive hours. They come again and again. "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might." The spirit of the army of the fighting Church depends on this exhortation being heard. The last of all fights has never yet lain behind us. The decision always lies in front of us. However often the Church militant may have been victorious, it has never been granted a victory which was final and decisive in the eyes of the world. That is why the world always minimizes the Church's fight, and so do those Churches that still serve the world. "Where is your victory?" is the mocking question asked the soldiers of Christ. The true spirit of the Christian army is seen in its ignoring such mockery, for they know that Christ, the Crucified, never allows anyone to conquer, except in the way He conquered, i.e., through His cross. The cross can conquer, but never the man who fights with it and for it. The fighting Church is always the suffering Church. "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."

What a remarkable saying! The world crucifies Christ's warrior, and by the same cross is itself rejected. Now we can understand better why any Church allied with the world tries to keep far from the Church militant. It is indeed prepared to take a little share in the fight for God, but only a little share, and above all, no cross. The cross! The cross! The cross! That is the vital point. The world grasps at once that it has only to bring Christians to the point where they will do anything "lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ." "Peace, peace, and again peace"

proclaim the false prophets of the Church, "when there is no peace" (Jer. vi. 14). Let us not hurt brotherly love, is another such lying word of peace. But the spirit of the Church militant is stronger. There will always be some seduced to leave the ranks. No war concerned with fundamental principles can ever be waged without desertions. The Church militant, however, can bear it; its ranks are filled up again, and even if they should not be, the small company will be stronger than the larger was. "But we are not of them that shrink back into perdition; but of them that have faith unto the saving of the soul." Are we saying this about ourselves? Is it an expression of our pride as fighters? Oh! we know the danger that fighting may make proud and suffering vain. So let it be but something overheard; something we would never dare to say, but which has been said to us. Thus we say it ourselves. We can say it, because cowardly, weak, and vain though we are, we believe in the cross of the Lord Christ. Then the cowardly become brave, the weak strong, the vain steadfast, and the word runs along the ranks of the fighting men, "We are weak, cowards and vain, but we will not give way."

It is always the same miracle, and the world is always amazed and does not understand it. Think of all the things men are saying about Martin Niemoeller. Is he really the greatest of heroes? No. Is he really the greatest of martyrs? No. What is he then? He is one who has not been led astray in all his temptations, a saint resisting the might of temptation, which Satan uses for his attacks. Niemoeller too has his hours of weakness, and yet he does not become weak. He withstands; he resists unto blood. We, the other fighters, experienced that we were called out of tears and deep depression to stand around our man, and that the word was given us which our Lord once promised His disciples, when He sent them out among the wolves. We were able to make use of the word that had been given us not because we were men of strong character—that may sometimes be a help, but it may sometimes be a hindrance, too—but because we believed we could call Jesus Lord, not through our own strength, but through the power of the Holy Spirit. Behind all true warfare stands grace, the grace of forgiveness, the grace that is given freely, because it has already won everything we need in the fight. Ye men

of the Church, preach atonement through grace, preach belief in the word, and you are preaching the Church militant. "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

V

Simeon said to Mary in the temple, "A sword shall pierce through thy own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." The sword of the Church, which is the sword of the word of God is two-edged. It cuts both him against whom it is wielded and him who wields it. The Church militant knows no fight in which the fighter has not to fight himself. That makes it a strange fight indeed for the politicians and generals of this world.

The Church militant cannot fight without calling itself to repentance. The call to repentance is its war-cry and even its shout of victory. And so it knows no pessimism, because it begins with the call to repentance. On its knees it calls aloud to its fighters, "*You* are the conquered," and as the conquered they march to the fight. They have already passed through the judgment of God, when they fight their first battle with the powers between heaven and earth. Before they fire their first shot, they have once been completely conquered. They know defeat before they get to know the fight itself. They cannot hope for victory till they have been humbled to the dust. They cannot wield their sword until it has been beaten from their grasp. They cannot attack before they have been taken prisoner.

As prisoners they are free for the fight ; as the defeated they are mighty for victory ; as the disarmed they are strong for the attack.

That is why they call one to another, fighter to fighter, "Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on life eternal, whereunto thou wast called, and didst confess the good confession in the sight of many witnesses." Confession is the spiritual weapon with which the Christian army fights. The Lord Himself stressed confession, when He was preparing His disciples for the coming fight ; He said, "Whosoever therefore shall confess Me before men, him will I confess also before My Father, which is in heaven."

But the Church forgets just this again and again. The Church, its ministers and its members, think they have done enough when they are "religious," which means, when they go to church and let an edifying sermon be preached at them. They want to believe in a pious way ; but they lack both the courage and the joyous desire to confess before men. They even lack all understanding for it. The word "confession" possesses no attractive ring for them. They have never noticed that this word conveys something special that goes beyond that which we generally call faith. They seem to have forgotten that Paul, speaking from experience, tells us, "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness ; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." Confession is essential. You can believe before you confess, but you can never reap the fruit of your faith, eternal salvation, unless you confess before men. That is why the Church militant is essential ; it is not only a product of the needs called forth by the confusions of the world, it is indeed essential for the salvation of the world, for the real redemption of those that believe.

Have you not noticed the joy that awakens there ? If you keep your God to yourself, you show neither obedience nor love, and you are but "sounding brass or a clanging cymbal." Have you not noticed how Satan wants to deceive you ? Allegedly in the name of love he wants to hold you back from the fight, and thus doing holds you back from love itself. If you are not willing to fight in the ranks of the Church militant, you are abandoning the world, you are abandoning your neighbour to the Destroyer.

So you will learn in very truth that it is a power other than your strength that fits you for the fight. It is wonderful how grace is able out of the most unsuitable people to make warriors for Christ. During the fight many have been a disappointment, of whom it was thought that they would hold their own ; others of whom nothing was expected have caused surprise by resisting and fighting unmoved and firm.

Firmness and faithfulness are both gifts of grace. Accept that grace, and with it you will receive faithfulness, and constancy, and firmness ; and none will be able to conquer you. No power of this world will be too strong for you. "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. xvi. 18), and they shall not prevail against you either, if you are a

living member of the Church, a living member of the body of the Lord.

VI

The Church expects of us "that we stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." That "together" is decisive. The true decision to which Christ calls men is always a decision to strive together for the faith of the gospel. Anyone that has ever been a soldier knows the beauty of true comradeship. Now the call is to comradeship in the Church militant.

Are you sitting alone by yourself thinking over the needs of the Church and of the unredeemed world? When your brother comes, you can think over the same things together. Do you want to confess, every man for himself, and are you looking for the right words for the purpose? When your brother joins you, you can sit down together and work together with great blessing and profit. How blessed was the fruit of the common work of confession, which the German confessional fight gave us through the grace of God. This fellowship of the Church militant redeems each and every one of us from the distress of his loneliness. It is only in the fight that Christians become comrades and find living and active fellowship. This experience is wonderful and unique.

It is then that the depths of Christian fellowship really open up to us. How very much it means that Christians can mutually affirm that they have true "fellowship in the faith!" He who will not fight separates himself from that fellowship and stands—outside with a life devoid of blessing. He who is willing for the fight is always in that fellowship and blessed is his life.

Fellowship gives knowledge. Fellowship brings humility. Fellowship begets joy.

We close this, the first half of a meditation on the Church militant, with some words of Paul, the apostle of the fight, "Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me." What humility the apostle shows! He cannot live, cannot manage, cannot work, cannot fight, cannot conquer without the help of the prayers of his brethren. O praying Church! let each pray for the other; pray all together; let each pray for his brother as for himself; let each pray for himself as for his brother.

But there is not only humility there. What courage he shows! It is not easy to ask for prayer, when one is leader, to solicit prayers, when one is their spiritual father. What strength he shows by allowing himself to be so weak and by speaking so openly of his needs!

But not only humility and courage are there. What love he shows! The love of the Spirit is invoked, and in its name the apostle asks his brethren in the faith for their help through prayer. He knows, that without his request they will not be able to love one another.

But not only humility, courage and love are there. How much trust and faith he shows! He is sure that he can expect it from his brethren; he knows that the Lord wills it and the Spirit gives it. He knows that his faith will bring him this fruit. He believes in his request for help through prayer.

Lastly, how much gracious comfort he shows! Where there is comfort, there is the Gospel. For many years I have been allowed to use these words in varied needs. Ever and again they brought me comfort, and they bring me comfort to-day, as I think of the fights that are past, or as I look forward to battles yet to be. Our fight is never over. It is true that peace is always beckoning us and passes through the whole fight of the Church militant like a breath of eternity, but we never attain the peace which is never broken by following war. And if we, hardened through the fights that are past, forget to be afraid in this world, then the desire for peace passes through our soul and makes it sometimes weak and fearful. But it is then we hear that great word of comfort from the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, again, "Ye will strive together with me in your prayers to God for me." The only result of this fight can be salvation. There is but one fight that we all fight, though it may assume so many different forms and may break up into so many different single combats. In the forced calm of imprisonment which results in the hardest of all fights, the Apostle writes to his Church in Philippi, "Ye have the same conflict which ye saw in me, and now hear to be in me."

One fight, one Spirit, one Church, one Lord and Saviour of the world!

(This ends the first half of the meditation on the Church Militant. The second half deals with its suffering and victory.)