

The Church Militant

A BIBLICAL MEDITATION

(Part II).

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(The first half of this Meditation appeared in the April-June issue).

VII.

“AND after the fire a still small voice” (I Kings xix. 12). “This text means a voice of a silence which either wrapped the world like a veil, or fell upon it like dust on one vast desolation. In either case it means the arresting, solemn, dread stillness of the great waste-places” (John Oman). Storms, earthquakes, conflagrations, convulsions, destruction, upheavals, times of judgment, crises and catastrophes sweep across the face of the earth. The fight of the kingdom of God on earth is inseparably bound up with these periods, with the epochs of mighty storms, consuming fires, and devastating tempests.

God teaches us to hear His “still, small voice.” There is always a “holy remnant”; it listens to that solemn stillness which follows the agony of nature, the catastrophes of world history. Believers both live in the great periods of judgment and survive them. A striking incident in the history of Judaism can be used to illustrate this. During the siege of Jerusalem by Titus in the year 70 Yochanan Ben-Zakkai, a leading rabbi, had himself brought secretly into the Roman camp; he persuaded them to let him live in a miserable little town; and thus rescued the “Torah.” By devious paths the fighting Church is brought through temporal judgments, and one day it will be brought through the eternal judgment. The zealot and martyr, who falls in the fight, the gentle saintly woman, who dies resignedly, and the preserver, like that Yochanan Ben-Zakkai, one and all heard the “still small voice,” while the storms of judgment were still raging; they heard God’s voice; they veiled their face like Elijah; they received God’s orders and obeyed them without question. “Here is the patience of the saints, they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (Rev. xiv. 12).

In the judgment of men every fight waged by Christ’s

warriors is a foolish and impossible entanglement, nay more, an enterprise lacking in all seriousness. The world condemns all that fight for the Church as extremists ; they do not fit into society. Such as those of whom the Epistle to the Hebrews writes, " Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, waxed mighty in war, turned to flight armies of aliens " (xi. 33-34), automatically place themselves outside the principles of the society of well-bred people. A man like Martin Niemoeller, who is beyond doubt a well-bred man, would offend almost all his enthusiastic followers everywhere, if they could only meet him. The world, if we may put it that way, is proud of its moderation ; for it the fight of the Church is only a forbidden presumption, for which room can only be found in the museum of the Church, i.e., in the memory of past periods of Christianity. We need not be surprised then that the totalitarian enemies of the Church are trying to put everything that has to do with the Church of Christ into this museum. That is being done in the imitation of the Church, " the church of well-bred people," in " the church of society." But it has already been seen to that no one will frivolously call himself a warrior of Christ, for he will have to concern himself with those things in the passage just quoted, with the subduing of mighty kingdoms, with the stopping of the mouths of wild beasts, with the quenching of devastating conflagrations. Of a truth the world is tilting at windmills, when it thinks it must take measures against the imagined presumption of the Church Militant. If there were presumption there, it would be full dearly paid for. But the Church will be happy and proud of her experiences in the fight. The chronicles of the fights of the Church, be it martyrdoms, or witnessings and confessings, are the eternal song of the Church, a song she sings together with the heavenly hosts, the eternal song, which is again and again heard in the Church's hymns, the song of

" One army of the living God,
To His command we bow ;
Part of the host have crossed the flood,
And part are crossing now."

We, who are proclaiming *the* King whose kingdom is ever-

lasting and whose servants are without fear, are not led astray by the fascinating "wonders of Antichrist." Nay rather in the midst of the victories of those that follow the man who claims to be the sole prophet of God to-day, in the midst of the victories of "the new Mahomet" we hear a "still, small voice," which shall come, and in which *is* God, the Lord. It is *thus* we believe in victory.

VIII.

The Church Militant is never found fighting in the ranks of the world ; it would be waste of words to belabour that point further. But it is not fighting only against the world, for it is not on the side of the numberless moralists who preach repentance, and only repentance, to the world. It does not find its pride in accusing and in looking for the guilty in everything wrong that happens. Its whole fight against the world is against that world that God so loved that He gave His only begotten Son for it. Our fight against the world is a fight against a world, which *is* God's world, and which shall once again be God's world. The fighter against the world gives himself as sacrifice and as prize in the fight ; he has not come into the world to be ministered unto, but to minister, a ransom for many. The Church Militant fights a *double fight*, a fight against the world and a fight for the world. Those who fight this double fight see with Christ in the cup of the angel in the Garden of Gethsemane the innumerable multitudes of the fallen and damned.

That is why the Church warns her members against the coming powers of seduction, which will be the worse the more humanity progresses. "But the Spirit saith expressly, that in later times some shall fall away from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils, through the hypocrisy of men that speak lies, branded in their own conscience as with a hot iron" (1 Tim. iv. 1-2). Read the small, little-considered Epistle of Jude ; listen to Paul's so unwillingly-heard admonition, "A man that is heretical after a first and second admonition refuse" (Titus iii. 10). "*Haereses oportet esse*" is Paul's dictum. That does not mean that we are joyfully to welcome heretics, but that they are inevitable ; we are not to mourn about them feebly, "We have neither power nor call to save the nation as nation in its entirety, any more than the Apostles had the power or

call to re-establish the Greek nation or to regenerate the Roman Commonwealth" (Vilmar). Separation, expulsion, reprobation, anathematizing are all means by which the Church gathers and purifies its troops and leads them to the battlefield. When we had uttered the first condemnations in the confessional struggle in 1933, we began to be the Church Militant. We are not Arminians and Latitudinarians, but neither are we hierarchs and grand inquisitors.

During the years of the Church struggle hardly any portion of Scripture was more used by us than the Epistles to the Seven Churches in the Revelation of John. For there we found the spirit that judges and loves, the spirit that separates and suffers in the separating. In them we are preserved from the spirit of the Synod of Dortrecht and the spirit of Arminius, both of which have sorely wounded the Church, especially the churches of England. Of a truth it is only to "the victor" that God "gives to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God" (Rev. ii. 7). Therefore the angel of God speaks thus to the churches in this world, "Repent therefore; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth" (Rev. ii. 16). There is no bloodier fight than this, for it is a fight in which no quarter is given; hear the words written to the church in Thyatira, "Behold I do cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of her works. And I will kill her children with death" (Rev. ii. 22-23). Such severity is followed by equal clemency, "But to you I say, to the rest that are in Thyatira, as many as have not this teaching, which know not the deep things of Satan, as they say; I cast upon you none other burden. Howbeit that which ye have, hold fast till I come" (Rev. ii. 24-25). Such are to become "pillars in the temple of my God" (Rev. iii. 12). It is only a small door that has been opened for them, but no one will be able to slam it in their face (Rev. iii. 8). When the separation has been carried through, there is but "little strength" left on the side of Christ's warriors, but the power to fight is granted it. Those who have taken on themselves the separation from the lost and damned are granted in grace the power to do what the idealists of this world can never do. And when we no longer listen to the Word, "two shall be on one bed, the one shall be taken and the other

shall be left" (Luke xvii. 34), we cannot endure a fight. He who would be soft without letting himself be hardened, or he who is hard and will not let himself be relaxed, will be no true warrior in the ranks of the Church Militant.

Man always only wants to see and grasp one side of things in war. In earthly war he discusses the question, May we kill? and quite ignores the fact that war does not only mean killing but also being killed. In spiritual warfare he demands that the Christian should sacrifice himself (should let himself be killed), but he does not want to grasp that the Christian is fighting and must kill his enemy spiritually. So it is that men can find a right attitude neither to earthly nor spiritual wars.

The relevance of this to spiritual warfare is that normally comprehension for the true aim of the war is lacking. There is only one such aim, the destruction of man's self-deification. To achieve this aim we must judge and kill spiritually. For thus saith the Lord, "For I have come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law: and a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt. x. 35-37). The greatest danger for modern man is always that he does not want to grasp the fact of devilish powers, that because of so-called love he will not fight, and finally plunges into the abyss together with those whom he should have fought.

The fight against the world should always be a fight for it, i.e., for its rescue. But the fight for the world should never cease fighting against it.

"The time is drawing near that we shall no longer lift up our hands in prayer in ones, isolated one from another, but together as congregations, as Church. We shall so do it that we shall be multitudes, even if they are relatively small multitudes compared to the thousands of thousands who have fallen away; we shall confess and praise aloud the Lord who was crucified and is risen, and is coming again. What kind of prayer, confession, song of praise will that be? It is a prayer of deepest love just for the lost ones that stand around us, who may well have already raised their hands to deal us a deadly blow. It is a prayer for those

wandering, confused, agitated, and devastated souls; a prayer that they may enjoy the same love and the same peace in which we rejoice; a prayer that will penetrate deep into their souls and draw their hearts with a much stronger grip than they are able to exert on our hearts, even though they try the utmost that hate is capable of. Yes, the Church, which is really waiting for its Lord, which really understands the time with its signs of final separation, must throw herself on this prayer of love with all the powers of her soul, with the united powers of her holy life, and with folded hands cry ceaselessly into the very faces of the lost, 'Have mercy, Lord, on these who are also called to the eternal life of peace and love, just as we are.' . . . He who holds back now even once in his confession from the until now customary and partly excusable motive of consideration for the world is not even a virgin without oil; he is the servant who buried his pound. Consideration and reserve have ceased—do thou in the Church keep the confession before the eyes of all, in season and out of season; it is the last time. Let them answer, and they must answer briefly, Yes or No. It will not be granted thee to learn much of Christ; there is only sufficient time to *confess* the Lord" (A.F.C. Vilmar, 1800-1868).

IX.

Paul has given us a Magna Charta of love and another of the fight; the former is in his first epistle to the Corinthians, the latter in the second, in chapter 6. In the German confessional struggle we did not pray publicly for any who made any use of political weapons—and what a political fight it was!—and had been persecuted because of a political phrase. We succeeded by this severe discipline in ensuring that our weapons did not become prematurely blunt. It was not a retreat from the fight against the world, but rather the most effective form of our offensive against the world, "Giving no occasion of stumbling in anything, that our ministration be not blamed" (11 Cor. vi. 3). What will be the appearance, the speech, the conduct of those that have passed through "stripes, imprisonments, tumults, labours, watchings and fastings," through "glory and dishonour, evil report and good report," and who themselves call themselves "unknown and yet well known, dying and behold we

live, chastened and not killed" (II Cor. vi. 5, 8-9)? If we give no occasion for stumbling under *such* circumstances, it means that we neither complain nor lament, that we do not speak bitterly nor arrogantly, that we do not become hard nor empty. What makes the world stumble? If the servants of Christ cannot suffer; if they cannot rebuke; if they are not redeemed, if they do not possess all things; if they do not remain true, although they are at everybody's call; if they follow the Right or Left or Centre; if their love is not sincere; if they no longer make others rich.

We fighters are placed in the midst of mighty spirit-armies, which would tear us in pieces:

Glory! For us? Yes! But there is glory too for the hirelings of *dishonour*, but it is purely earthly glory. For us, though, there is dishonour too, the glory of dishonour, and that is not for the hirelings of that glory.

Dying! For us? Yes! We, and not the faithless, who have taken good care of themselves, suffer and sacrifice ourselves. But yet we *live*, just we, and we are the judgment for the faithless, for we the dying live.

Sorrowful! For us? Yes! He has never fought who has never known despair, who has known a way of escape in every need. The children of this world do not know despair, or if they do, they die of it. But we are of *good cheer*, just because we despair. Despair leads us from death to life. Disconsolateness leads them from life to death.

The holy Apostle having finished his Magna Charta of the fight adds a touching phrase least of all to be expected there, "Our mouth is open unto you, O Corinthians, our heart is enlarged." Such was in some small measure our own experience in the German concentration camp, when we meditated on the Magna Charta of the fight in II Corinthians quietly to ourselves.

The fight of the Church possesses its own dialectic. It is not abstract. It is at once bloody and spiritual, invisible and visible; it connects death and life. So it comes that our own suffering is always half hidden from us—I am speaking of the suffering of the warriors of the Church—for it is included in a movement, in a happening that comes from God. What we know of it we know through our being crucified with Christ. So it is that Christ knows *what* we suffer as His soldiers; we hardly know more than *that* we are

suffering. For the sufferings that come from the fights of the Church Militant are those mysterious sufferings of which was said that they "fill up the afflictions of Christ." "For it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me." "For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death worketh in us, but life in you" (11 Cor. iv. 11-12).

X.

"So then death worketh in us, but life in you." Such a metabolism does not take place in me or you, but in US, in the body of the Church, for we are the body of Christ (1 Cor. xii. 27).

The body of Christ is the bearer of this mysterious metabolism, in which death becomes food for life, dying is the medicine against death. Death becomes life, sin becomes grace, lies become truth (this last wording is from Dostoevsky's "The Brothers Karamasoff"). "I am the living bread which came down out of heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever; yea and the bread which I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world" (John vi. 51). The Christian cannot fight without the bread of life.

The scene changes: Now Christ is the only fighter, and He is fighting for us who receive His sacrifice and eat His true flesh and drink His true blood; it is for the old, the women and children, the weak and ill, the poor; all these are not at the front; He alone bleeds for them, He, our peace. But in the same moment the scene changes again. As members of Christ we are called to the war and He leads us into the fight, fighting together with Him as the members of the one body under the leadership of the head; and we, the old, the women and children, the weak and ill, the poor, all stand with Him in the front line against the powers of this world.

The members of the body of Christ go a *sacramental way*. The life they live can only be understood in the mystery of the sacrament. They must ever again confess, that HE alone fights for them, bleeds and suffers, that He alone bears all. But as soon as they confess that, they confess too that they are fellow-fighters in the fight of the Church. Just as in the sacrament the natural unites with grace, and

the living, present Christ with the natural elements, so that the union is both spiritual and natural (for that is the meaning of sacramental), so Christ unites Himself in us with our natural life through the faith given us by grace. Head and members have but one life together, and are yet different, namely Christ (head) and we (members).

In the world the way of the Christian is always a "third" way. He does not go with the party of the weak, which we call the Left, nor with the party of the strong, which we call the Right. He does not even go the middle way by using the cowardly "and also" (though he often enough is found in the most suspicious proximity to it). If Christendom lays down its arms, it becomes at once the prisoner of some party, generally of the strong in the eyes of the world, sometimes of the weak, often enough of those that are neither strong nor weak. To go with the strong may lead to success, it may be attractive to be with the weak, to try to hold a middle way may be clever, but the Church Militant will never choose any of these ways. The way of the fighting Church is the way of active faith in this world; the world and its parties find it suspicious, men of good will and clean heart find it surprising.

We never know *where* this way may lead, for God is His own builder. We know but one thing about it; somewhere it runs past the altar and pulpit of the Church. There we find the inexhaustible arsenal of the fighting Church.

It can, however, happen that the Church's warriors should on occasion become "voluntary allies in good faith" of one of the earthly parties. This is always temporary, the result of a special order from above. The continual intercessions of the Son at the right hand of the Father contain also intercessions on account of which the Father can order a relief campaign on earth for one of the parties fighting there. I think we can know approximately when this is likely to happen; it is when the horsemen of the Apocalypse ride across the earth—when some power suppresses both Right and Left and stops the natural competition of parties, groups, classes, and nations on earth.

Here we should quote Paul's word to his spiritual son, Timothy, "And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully" (2 Tim. ii. 5).

We should never use the phrase "holy war," for it has

been poisoned by that form of religion that cannot differentiate between the kingdom that is of that world, and the kingdom that comes from this. We should, therefore, beware of calling our fight a legitimate one just because it has brought us through concentration camps, through many outward sufferings and heavy afflictions. We only then participate in a "legitimate" fight, when it is the one in which the Crucified, the Humiliated, the Exalted, the Slain Lamb, is victor. Only the life and working of the holy body of Christ makes a fight legitimate.

Wherever the believer lives out his faith coming from the forgiveness of sins, is justified through grace alone, the saved lost follow Him, who died for them, and fight alongside Him in His fight for them. The Christian has only then *justification* for his fight, when he fights on the basis of justification through the free grace of God; but then he has full *justification* indeed. The body of the Church lives, when the power of the keys is being used; both it and its members sink into death when the forgiveness of sins is silenced; it becomes sick if forgiveness is made to depend on men.

So we fight the fight of the Church, without being weighed down by the anxieties and problems of this life, freed from the fear that reigns in this world, without the vain regard for others that men that are servants take on themselves; it is true we are bound, but by love and responsibility, and therefore free through grace and faith; we are not led astray, for we are persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. viii. 38-39).

XI.

Man thinks he must first conquer himself, then he can fight for God's cause. But man can never conquer himself. Whenever he obtains effective partial victories over himself, these very victories make him a slave to his victories. That has been the fate of the moralist, of the stoic, of the idealist. The so-called "unending approach to the ideal of complete victory over oneself" had far better be called "an unending prolonging of man's defeat in his fight against himself."

Moralists and stoics, once they enter the sphere of hard facts, become without the least restraint dictators, tyrants and murderers, e.g. the stoics among the Roman emperors, Robespierre, Hitler. Until man realizes and acknowledges his defeat in his fight against himself, he is not capable of following the call to the fight of the Church.

We are speaking of a fight that man never understands but that he experiences, of the fight that the patriarch Jacob experienced in the valley of the Jabbok in the darkness of night (Gen. xxxii) ; to use the words of Hosea, Jacob " had power over the angel, and prevailed ; he wept and made supplication unto him " (xii. 4). You will fight, you will prevail, you will fight with God and prevail over God. But first surrender ! Luther said about Jacob's fight, " God frightens Jacob and fills him with fear, but he begins to cry aloud and pray ; so He comes and would strangle him. That is truly a terrible fight, when God Himself fights, and appears as enemy, as though He wishes to kill. He who would endure in such a fight and emerge victorious, he must in truth be a holy man and a true Christian. That is why this story is so dark, for the matter with which it deals is so high. . . . Jacob is stronger than the man, but not because he is in reality stronger than the Lord. . . . But the Lord would test the powers of *one* man only, for He Himself, the Lord, is in truth stronger. I indeed do not desire to wrestle with a believing man, especially one that has the promise in addition, even if I were a strong giant ; for in such a man nature exceeds its powers. . . . But when the Lord saw that Jacob was stronger, especially in faith, which God does not willingly resist, He used the special skill of the wrestler and touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh. . . . *But Jacob answered, ' I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me.'* Why do you not let Him go ? Your thigh has been injured ; you are already lame ; what do you still hope to do ? ' I feel no weakness yet,' says Jacob. But who is strengthening you then ? ' My faith, the promise, yes, specially the weakness of my faith.' "

It is always the same hobbler Jacob-Israel-Paul-Luther, who confesses, " When I am weak, then am I strong " (II Cor. xii. 10), and who calls to his spiritual son Timothy and to every coming generation of theologians and Christians, " I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course,

I have kept the faith : henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day ; and not only to me, but also to all them that have loved His appearing " (11 Tim. iv. 7-8).

Pride and humility in the fight have come together. The true soldier must be both proud and humble ; they are the constituents of his nature as soldier. " The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but mighty before God to the casting down of strong holds ; casting down imaginations, and every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ ; and being in readiness to avenge all disobedience, when your obedience shall be fulfilled " (2 Cor. x. 4-6).

Broken into fragments there lie on the ground the outrageous presumption of created powers (" Imaginations against the knowledge of God are cast down "), the blindly raging hardness of human intellect (" Every thought is brought into captivity "), the mad defiance of human self-will (" All disobedience is broken "). The last defence of the stoic is stormed ; it is conquered by Him in whom there is " no form nor comeliness," by Him who " was despised and rejected of men ; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief : and as one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we esteemed Him not " (Is. liii. 3-4). He is Christ the Conqueror.

XII.

Christ the Conqueror will conquer in the last of battles. At the end of each of the epistles to the Seven Churches there stands a promise to him who is victorious. The victors are promised, " that they will eat of the tree of life," " that they will not be hurt of the second death," " that they will eat of the hidden manna, and receive a new name written on a white stone," " that they will have authority over the nations to judge them," " that they will be arrayed in white garments, and they will in no wise have their name blotted out of the book of life, and will have their names confessed before the Father," " that they will be pillars in the temple of God," and finally " that they will sit down with Christ in His throne."

The phrase "eternal life" is not just a frame without a picture. It acts as a frame to the fullness of the mysteries of the kingdom of Christ. Bearing the indestructible treasure of these mysteries the Church Militant looks to the resurrection of the body, awaited by the martyrs. After the Lamb had opened the first four seals, after the horsemen of the Apocalypse had passed over the world bearing with them and revealing the diamond-hard facts of this world, John saw, as the fifth seal was opened, "under the altar the souls of them that had been slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held." Therefore the fighting Church makes known the victory of its saints, the splendour of its cloud of witnesses. Therefore the fighting Church knows that she always includes the saints above and the saints below, those that have fallen asleep in Christ and those that are now fighting in the army of God. "Pray, and time stands still. . . . Pray, and while you pray you partake of the eternal rest of the saints" (Vilmar).

The victory of the Church is a message of the fighting Church. "Cinderella" wrinkled and stained is even now bursting forth into splendour with the radiant glory of the coming victory. If the Church shrinks from her victory, then she must shrink in fear from the fight that has been laid upon her, for then it could but consist of that entirely respectable and unending series of defeats in the fight with oneself. The certain hope of the resurrection of the flesh, the radiant faith that all graves will open in one and the same hour, and that those that believed will enter the eternal light all together, hand in hand, to see that they believed on earth, all this sustains us in the fight of which Luther has written in his Easter hymn :

" 'Twas a wondrous war I trow,
 Life and death together fought,
 But life hath triumphed o'er his foe,
 Death is mocked, and set at nought.
 Yes, 'tis as the Scripture saith,
 Christ through death hath conquered death.
 Hallelujah ! "

The Risen One says, "All authority has been given unto me in heaven and on earth." Of the Beast, which we call

the Antichrist, has been said (he cannot say it himself), "And it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and there was given unto him authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation" (Rev. xiii. 7).

At exactly the same place the word of God says, "*Here is the patience and the faith of the saints*" (Rev. xiii. 10). And "out of the altar" from which the Lord Christ gives us His holy body to eat and holy blood to drink ("So that not only our soul and spirit, but also our flesh and blood should enjoy His grace, goodness, kindness and glory in all eternity"—J. Mathesius, 1568) speaks "the voice of another angel" to us, "*Yea, O Lord God, the Almighty, true and righteous are Thy judgments*" (Rev. xvi. 7). We, the Church Militant, hear that voice.
