

Faith Pulpit

The Matter of Militancy

I. Militancy—its meaning

The matter of militancy among Bible-believing Christians has fallen upon hard times. This is the age of openness, cooperation, diplomacy, negotiation, and dialogue. To be militant is to be out of step! It is not thought wrong to hold your own convictions, but you must do so quietly and without insisting that others agree with you. Tolerate diversity and pluralism, and you will be well thought of.

What exactly is militancy, anyway? One dictionary says it is to be “engaged in warfare or combat ... aggressively active (as in a cause).” It springs from one’s values, is expressed as an attitude, and results in certain behavior. One’s values are those things in which one strongly believes. They are what one believes to be fundamentally important and true. From this comes an attitude which is unwilling to tolerate any divergence from these fundamentally important truths and which seeks to defend them. It results in behavior which speaks up when these truths are attacked or diluted and which refuses to cooperate with any activity which would minimize their importance. The term is a military one and carries the idea of defending what one believes to be true.

II. Militancy—its significance

A. Historically:

When the question is asked, “Should we be militant fundamentalists?” the answer is, “There is no other kind!” To genuinely be a fundamentalist, one must be militant. When Curtis Lee Laws coined the term “fundamentalist,” he applied it to those who not only believed in the fundamental doctrines of the faith but who also were willing to do “battle royal” for those fundamentals. American Church historian, Robert T. Handy, in describing the differences between the fundamentalists and conservatives in the Northern Baptist Convention in the 1920’s, comments,

The main difference between them was probably more a matter of mood and spirit than basic theological divergence. Both subscribed to orthodox Protestant theological tenets, but the fundamentalists were more aggressive, more intransigent, more certain that they had the whole truth and their opponents had none. They not only militantly asserted the plenary inspiration of Scripture, but insisted that they had correctly apprehended its meaning and their opponents not at all. (Robert T. Handy, "Fundamentalism and Modernism in Perspective," *Religion in Life*, Vol. XXIV [1955], p. 39P.)

George Marsden defines a fundamentalist by stating,

A Fundamentalist is an Evangelical who is angry about something A more precise statement of the same point is that an American fundamentalist is an evangelical who is militant in opposition to liberal theology in the churches or to changes in cultural values or mores, such as those associated with 'secular humanism.' In either the long or the short definitions, fundamentalists are a subtype of evangelicals and militancy is crucial to their outlook. Fundamentalists are not just religious conservatives, they are conservatives who are willing to take a stand to fight. (George M. Marsden. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991. p. 1.)

When the March 1956 issue of *Christian Life* magazine sought to answer the question, "Is Evangelical Theology Changing?," it prefaced its "yes" answers by saying that in earlier days the fundamentalist watchword was "ye must earnestly contend for the faith," but that today's evangelical watchword was "ye must be born again." The difference was one of emphasis and attitude. Notably missing from evangelicalism today is fundamentalism's militancy.

B. Biblically:

Militancy is presented in Scripture as a proper response for believers. We see the Apostle Paul's condemnation of doctrinal error and those who taught it to the Galatians (1:6–9), his urging that believers in Rome note and separate from those causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which they had learned (16:17), and his commands to the Ephesian church's leadership (in Acts 20:17–38) challenging them on the basis of the kind of ministry he had had in their midst to take heed to themselves and to their flock that they should shepherd it in a God-honoring way (v. 28). This includes declaring to their people the entire counsel of God (v. 27) and watching out for the flock's spiritual welfare by warning them of wolves and false Christian leaders (v. 29–31). This is the sum and substance of militancy!

Many today, having grown up in fundamentalist circles, do not bear the scars of militancy which their fathers had as a result of conflict with error and defense of the truth. They wear the fundamentalist label, but perhaps a reexamination should be made in light of the militancy issue to see if there is a

mislabeling. Perhaps some would really feel more comfortable with the evangelical label. For others such reexamination could be a reminder to them of their need to stand firm and steadfast for the truth, not tolerating error or a toning down of the whole counsel of God. The fundamentalist is convinced that contending earnestly for the faith (Jude 3) is not a debatable option but a divine order.

III. Militancy—its abuse

Some, no doubt, shy away from militancy because it can easily be abused. Militancy, however, is not the same as meanspiritedness. It does not have to arise from poor motives or the desire for personal power. It does not need to be imbalanced, where “issues” become one’s hobby horse. Nor does it imply a lack of ethics—rushing into print without checking the facts, false labeling, or guilt by association. If some may be guilty of these abuses, the corrective is not an abandonment of militancy, but, rather, an ethical, careful, kind and yet firm outspokenness which stands for the truth and is willing to defend it against error. May God help us to be militant fundamentalists!

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