Biblical Language and Military Metaphors

Sticks and stones revisited

Few issues are more volatile today than the use of language. There are not many days in which "political correctness," "free speech," and "tolerance" issues don't make the news in one way or the other in the States. But the stakes regarding language usage in other parts of the globe tend to be even higher, and they continue to escalate. Often at the center of controversy is the way missionaries and other Christians speak of their evangelistic task — in particular the use of military language and metaphors.

Regular readers of EMQ will remember Stan Guthrie's fine "Global Report" in our October 1999 issue. It explored how Indian church and mission leaders were examining the possible role of word choices in the persecution of Christians. The article also mentioned that the AD2000 and Beyond Movement, the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Evangelical Fellowship of Mission Agencies would be working with others to plan a consultation on "language used in mission discourse and promotion." That historic consultation has now taken place.

June 1-3, 2000, were the dates, and Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California was the venue. More than 30 missiologists, agency leaders, and theologians gathered, concluding that military-oriented language (words like "target," "conquer," "army," "crusade," "mobilize," "beachhead," "enemy," and "battle"), while biblical in many cases, and powerful as mobilizing tools, carry too much downside baggage and need to be replaced by other biblical, descriptive, and powerful terms. Following is their summary statement and a list of the participants. –The Editor

Consultation on Mission Language and Metaphors
Held at Fuller Theological Seminary
Pasadena, California June 1-3, 2000

Summary Statement

We, the participants in the consultation, have gathered to think and pray together about the words, metaphors and images evangelicals use to communicate about the missionary mandate and endeavor to the world at large. We desire to honor God and glorify Him as we engage in communicating His love to the peoples of the earth. Where reflection on our words has reveal3ed less than Christlike attitudes or circumstances where we have unintentionally hurt others, we are eager to repent, apologize , and do better.

As a relatively small group of mission agency and church leaders, theologians and communicators, we comprise neither a comprehensive nor adequately representative cross-section of the evangelical spectrum. We do, however, comprise a group unified in our concern that unwise language choices not be a hindrance to persons truly hearing the Gospel of Christ. We hope and pray that our tentative beginning here will encourage others in our context and around the world to grapple with some of the issues we have considered.

We regret that certain words and images long employed to call the church to mission have increasingly caused offense to the very people with whom we are seeking to share the Good News. Some of these words and images are biblical; some are motivational tools from the secular arena that we use to inspire involvement and action. Many are military in nature: "target," "conquer," "army," "crusade," "mobilize," "beachhead," "advance," "enemy," "battle."

We may know what such terms mean to us, but what do they mean to others? Are we unintentionally making those we most want to

befriend feel we regard them as enemies, while helping opponents of Christian mission to make their case against us? Can we find more reconciling, redemptive words and images in Scripture and elsewhere that will aid us in expressing love, respect and effective witness for Christ, rather than creating an atmosphere of adversarial confrontation?

First, we agree about several basic principles:

1. We are not ashamed of the Gospel, which is salvation to those who believe. We seek to preach it, teach it, and demonstrate it through acts of love and mercy among all peoples in obedience to our Lord's command until He returns.

2. We realize that the Gospel itself is an offense and a stumbling block to those who reject it. We also understand that the mission of Christ will be opposed in many places and by all means, (including) persecution.

3. We affirm that the Kingdom of God has triumphed over all the kingdoms and powers of this world at the cross. Nevertheless there is indeed a battle under way between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan. In this spiritual battle we are privileged to partner with God in revealing Himself and setting the captives free.

While acknowledging these truths, we recognize the need to deal with several critical realities:

1. Metaphors and the mindsets and attitudes behind them are potent in shaping thought and compelling action. Positive metaphors are essential tools of missions and evangelism. When twisted or taken too far, however, the distort God's purposes. "Warfare" metaphors and terminology, while biblical in the cosmic/spiritual sense, have been misused in Christian mission communications. They have become increasingly counterproductive to mission work, sometimes endangering the lives of local believers, and are being used by opponents of the church to indict and impede its work. We therefore advocate an immediate end to the inappropriate use of such words.

Yes, we are called to the disciple and single-mindedness of soldiers at war (2 Tim. 2:3-4). However, "our struggle is not against flesh and blood" but against the unseen rulers of spiritual darkness (Eph. 6:12). Jesus Christ fulfills God's age-old message of love, forgiveness, reconciliation and blessing for the peoples according to God's promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:2,3). Jesus Himself is the great master of redemptive metaphors (see His parables), and Scripture offers rich treasure of words and images we can use to call God's people to mission. He proclaimed good news to the poor, release for the prisoners, and sight for the blind (Lk. 4:18).

We encourage Christian mission agencies and local churches to re-examine Scripture and restate their global task in terms consistent with the teaching and mission of Christ. Alternate words and images include blessing, healing, inviting, sowing and reaping, fishing, restoring family relationships, becoming reconcilers, peacemakers and ambassadors.

2. As a motivation for mission involvement, people are responding to the call to glorify God among the nations and wherever He is not yet being worshipped. They also respond to the call to follow Christ into servanthood and sacrifice, the call to lift up the downtrodden, the call to a life of great purpose and meaning in community with others of like mind. These are themes around which we need to develop metaphors to summon God's people to God's mission.

3. The new dynamics of globalization and instant global electronic information technologies are rapidly changing the context of our communication. The technology that opens the word to us also opens us—AND the words we say to the "home folks" and what we say to the world. The world, we must assume, will read or hear whatever we say to our own. Are we willing not to use language behind the back of unbelievers concerning their culture and location that we would not use face to face in sharing the message and love of Christ?

We encourage our evangelical friends, colleagues, churches and partner agencies around the world to think and pray with us about these things. We invite the reflection and wisdom of our brothers and sisters into what we hope will become an ongoing dialogue about these important issues, to the end that our light might shine brighter in the world, and that our ministry of reconciliation for the sake of God's great name might flourish.

Conference Participants

Mission and Church Leaders:
—Dwight Baker, World Christian Foundations
—Erich Bridges, International Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention
—David Broucek, TEAM
—Luis Bush, AD2000 & Beyond Movement
—Patrick O. Cate, CHRISTAR
—Gary Corwin, SIM/EMQ
—Bob Fulton, Association of Vineyard Churches
—David Greenlee, Operation Mobilization
—David Hanswen, International Ministries, Back to the Bible
—Richard Howell, Evangelical Fellowship of India
—John Lewis, Mission Aviation Fellowship
—Rick Love, Frontiers
—Rudolf Mak, OMF International
—John Mariner, World Witness, Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church
—Paul McKaughan, Evangelical Fellowship of Mission Agencies
—Stan Parks, Joshua Project 23
—Jerry Rankin, International Mission Board Southern Baptist Convention

—D. John Richard, AD2000 & Beyond Movement
—David Samuel, Evangelical Fellowship of Indian
—Bill Taylor, WEF Missions Commission
—Geoff Tunnicliffe, Task Force for Global Mission, Evangelical Fellowship of Canada
—Larry Walker, Advancing Churches in Mission Commitment
—Ralph Winter, U.S. Center for World Mission

Mission Theologians and Missiologists:
—David Hortano, New Life Community Church
—Sherwood Lingenfelter, School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary
—Wilbert Shenk, School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary

New Testament Scholars:
—Clinton Arnold, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University
—Richard Beaton, School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary

Muslims and military metaphors
By Rick Love

One of the aspiring elders of the church in a North African country, a Muslim background believer, was surfing the Internet. He found a Christian web site that spoke about the great things God was doing in his country. This ministry boasted of establishing "beachheads" and believed the gospel would go forth with power. Soon the country would be conquered for Christ. The team leader of our work talked about the site with this aspiring elder, a university graduate, who understood it in literal military terms. From his perspective, this group was planning a

military invasion of his country, a literal Christian jihad (holy war). If a mature Muslim background believer perceives these military metaphors as literal truths, how much more the average Muslim?[1]

The Message Muslims receive. Frontiers' first web site came across as too militant.

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[1] Since this incident, I have filed away one of my favorite mobilization sermons: "Take a Vote or Take the Land? (Joshua, Caleb and the Ten Spies)." While I use this story as illustrative material, my focus has been on seeking other metaphors and motivations for ministry to Muslims.

Because we used standard evangelical military jargon and metaphor, we were accused of negative attitudes toward Muslims. Critics rightly realized that Muslims would be reading our site and encouraged us to tone it down. Our language had to change.

Our present site now has an article entitled, "Ten Reasons Why We Love Muslims" splashed across it.[2] We realize that our site is not just for mobilization, but also for evangelization. What was once the exclusive domain of Christian audiences is not public domain. Literature and media once used primarily to mobilize Christian audiences for missions are now read on a global scale by Muslims. Globalization, especially through the Internet, impacts communication, either negatively or positively, depending on how it is used. Muslims believe in the devil and evil spirits, so they have some understanding of spiritual warfare. But their dominant paradigm about warfare is literal. The Islamic concept of *jihad* means that (most) Muslims think much like the saints in the Old Testament. They are on a crusade for Allah. He is on their side. Taking the land (i.e., world conquest) is their goal. The church's dark history with Muslims further strengthens a military perspective. When Muslims hear military metaphors used by evangelicals, they can't help but think of the Crusades. They do not know that this military show of force against Muslims was unbiblical and un-Christlike. Further, from their perspective, "Christians" were killing the "Muslims" in Kosovo and in Bosnia. Muslims see this and think, "The Crusades continue! They were not just historical anomalies."

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[2] We have sought a relational metaphor rather than a military metaphor for two reasons. (1) Muslims will read this, and we want to do everything we can (without compromising) to sow positive gospel seed. (2) Our primary focus in recruiting is Gen X, postmodern thinkers who see the world very differently than most Baby Boomers.

Culture and background. Military language has a subtle but powerful hold on evangelicals, especially missionaries. Our strategies and literature are sprinkled with it. In 1998, the International Council of Frontiers was framing an important letter to the rest of our movement. The reader of the letter repeatedly said, "Muslims who we target," when in fact the wording was, "Muslims whom we love." This brother, one of the most pastoral leaders in Frontiers, had to be corrected twice for this misreading. I too must confess my proclivity for using military metaphors. According to the Myers-Briggs personality test, I am a "Field-Marshall." Thus, I am drawn toward passages that describe the Christian life in terms of warfare. An editor had to expunge a few military terms in my book *Muslims, Magic and the Kingdom of God* (Pasadena: William Carey, 2000) even though I tried hard to write without using them.

My wife Fran like to give a quiz to our missionary candidates to break down their stereotypes and clarify their thinking. One of these questions: "In church planting it's important that we target receptive Muslims. True or false?" Everyone answers that question with a resounding "True!" She corrects them by saying, "False! We don't target Muslims. Targets are to shoot at. Muslims are to love."

Military metaphors are misunderstood by Muslims and overused by evangelicals. Furthermore, like any metaphor, military language can distort reality. Such metaphors subtly shape how we view the people to whom we are sent. Are they really "targets"? Does our warfare imagery subconsciously lead us to perceive Muslims as the "enemy"? At the very least, it seems to depersonalize our mission.

The Bible and military language. Any student of the Bible knows that military language and metaphor pervade Scripture.

This is incontrovertible. What is significant, however, is how and why the Bible uses military language.

In the Old Testament, holy war is a common theme. God endorses conquest and empowers his people to defeat pagan armies (cf. Deut. 9:3-6; Joshua). There is little actual military metaphor in the Old Testament, mostly literal language, describing actual military exploits. The saints and soldiers of the Old Testament have much in common with Muslim *jihad*.

But this changes in the New Testament. Physical opposition to God's enemies gives way to moral persuasion, illustrated most vividly in the life of Jesus. Whereas Muhammad rode into Mecca on a stallion, sword in hand, Jesus saddled up a donkey to ride into Jerusalem, to humbly suffer and die for the sins of the world. This theme dominates New Testament teaching. Instead of engaging in literal holy war, we are commanded to "love our enemies," "pray for those who mistreat us," "bless those who persecute us," and "overcome evil with good." (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:28; Rom. 12:14, 21).

The contrast between the Old testament view of warfare with the New Testament view is ably summarized by Jack B. Scott: From the point of view of the believer in the OT, the enmity [between God's people and unbelievers] is expressed in terms of physical opposition to the enemies of God and the church but with promises of a different way of handling the enemy in the future. In the NT era of the church, the enemy is to be loved. Opposition to the enemy is not now in terms of physical opposition but rather opposition by the preaching of the Gospel in love (Scott 1974:139).

While the New Testament does not mention literal holy war, it freely engages in metaphors that describe a spiritual war against spiritual enemies, primarily the world, the flesh, and the devil. The Bible calls us to battle against worldly perspectives hostile toward God (James 4:4; 1 John 2:15-16; Rom.12:2), crucify the flesh which wages war against our souls (1 Pet 2:11; Gal. 5:24; Rom. 6:11-19), and resist our enemy, the devil (James 4:7; 1 Pet. 5:8-10; Eph. 6:11-13).

This describes how military language is used. But why are these metaphors used? Vital parallels can be drawn between literal and spiritual warfare, of course. However, as G.B. Caird notes, "When two things are compared, they are not to be considered like in all respects. There is an intended point of comparison on which we are being asked to concentrate to the exclusion of all irrelevant fact" (1997:145).

I see at least two major reasons for military metaphors in the New Testament. The first is for the sake of comparison. There are significant parallels between the Christian life and the life of a soldier. Just as a soldier must be disciplined, must suffer, and must display singleness of purpose, so too must the Christian (2 Tim. 2:3-4). The second is for the sake of contrast. These metaphors are used primarily to contrast Christians' spiritual warfare with literal warfare. Our real enemy is the devil.

As Paul says, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers … " (Eph. 6:12). "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh" (2 Cor. 10:3). It is noteworthy, however, that these metaphors do not seem to have been used among peoples who believed in and engaged in holy war. Biblical authors carefully contextualized their language.

Moreover, in contrast to modern missions literature and strategy, the New Testament does not use military metaphors to describe the task of evangelism. Missions in the New Testament is not portrayed in military terms. Paul does not put on "crusades," "mobilize," "establish beachheads," or "target" a people. In other words,

evangelicals have "extended" the meaning of military metaphors to describe beyond the intent of New Testament authors. This does not mean that using military metaphors to describe missions is necessarily antibiblical. It does mean, however, that this is not explicitly affirmed in Scripture. Therefore, we may or may not use these metaphors, depending upon their relevance to our context.

Contextualizing in the third millennium. Gareth Morgan has a good word for us: Metaphors create insight. But they also distort. They have strengths. But they also have limitations. In creating ways of seeing they tend to create ways of not seeing. Hence, there can be no single theory or metaphor that gives an all-purpose point of view. There can be no "correct theory" for structuring everything we do.

The challenge facing modern managers (mission executives and missions) is to become accomplished in the art of using metaphor: to find appropriate ways of seeing, understanding, and shaping the situations with which they have to deal (Morgan 1997:348).

Expanding globalization and increased pluralism force us to consider more appropriate metaphors for ministry in the third millennium. Like biblical authors, we must contextualized our metaphors for maximum impact with minimum distortion.

Biblical authors use a plethora of metaphors to describe all aspects of truth.[3] Therefore, it would be prudent and contextually sensitive to find and use more nonmilitary metaphors in our missions literature. As John Gilchrist argues, our approach to Muslims should reflect charity, not militancy (Gilchrist 1990). Or maybe the provocative title of Christine Mallouhi's latest book says it even better: *Waging Peace on Islam*!

We should rather emphasize metaphors like "blessing" (Gen. 12:1-3; Gal. 3:8), "peacemaking" (Matt. 5:9; Eph. 2:11-17; Rom. 14:19), "farming," e.g., sowing and reaping (Matt. 13; 1 Cor. 3:5-8; Gal. 6:8-9), or relational images like "the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18-19).

Rather than stressing triumphalistic motivations like "taking the land" or "conquering these people for Christi," we should focus more on God's glory or God's compassion as a motivation for our ministry. This is biblical, understandable, and seems more relevant to our context.

But if we do use military metaphor (and I still think we should), let's emphasize the same things that New Testament authors emphasized: Let's call our workers to act like literal soldiers in terms of discipline, sacrifice, and singleness of purpose. Let's equip our missionaries to fight against the spiritual forces of darkness and not against people. And let's be careful that our strategies don't depersonalize the ministry of reconciliation, so that we can honestly say with Paul, "the love of Christ controls us" (2 Cor. 5:14).

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[3] For three excellent books on the subject, see *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* by George Ladd (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* by Vern Poythress (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), and *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* by G. B. Caird (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997).

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