
SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES: A Former Soldier of Christ Offers the Church a New Metaphor for Evangelism

by Spencer Burke

In high school it seems like everyone has a claim to fame. Some people are known for their athletic abilities, some for their academic accomplishments, others for their artistic/musical genius.

In my case, I was the crusading Christian—the guy who got Keith Green to come sing at our school. I not only mastered the Four Laws, I could give a solid Gospel presentation in five minutes or less. I regularly invited friends to church with me and rejoiced as they kneeled to receive Christ.

Looking back, there's no question in my mind that I was a committed soldier in God's army. Throughout high school, I trained hard, armed myself with the right verses and aggressively seized opportunities to share my faith. The only problem is I'm not sure being a

Christian soldier was such a great thing then—and it's even more problematic today.

A NEW METAPHOR

For years, the warrior metaphor has permeated our Christian subculture, particularly our approach to evangelism. I did "sword drills" in Sunday school and played with cardboard cutouts of spiritual armor. The Bible is filled with war imagery, particularly in the Old Testament.

But the Old and New Testament authors also use a lot of other images— including many agricultural pictures. While Paul's writings are steeped in warrior language, Jesus seems to be more partial to farmers, shepherds and fisherman. Taking the ground by force just didn't seem to be in His nature.

Back in 1977 at Encina High School, one of my closest friends was Mr. Bortello, the photography teacher. I met Ray Bortello when I was transitioning from junior high to high school. That process was tough. Certifiably cool in ninth grade, I was shocked to find myself sitting alone the next fall at high school. I remember one lunch hour in particular. The morning mist had turned to drizzle and the sky was threatening a real downpour. I was cold, lonely and miserable. When Mr. Bortello walked by, I didn't think too much of it. But then he spoke to me. Seeing my saddened face and soggy brown bag, he called me by name and invited me inside to his classroom. A lowly freshman, I soon found myself shooting paper hoops with a bunch of upperclassmen—grateful didn't even begin to cover it.

Looking back, I realize that Ray was a powerful missionary, though he never invited me to his church or extolled me to explore my relationship with Jesus Christ. In fact, I don't think we ever really discussed religion. Still, Ray looked an awful lot like Jesus to me. He stood by me in good times and bad.

He nurtured and guided me. His trust and friendship were steadfast.

In many ways, Ray was a spiritual gardener. He planted seeds in kids and let God grow them to maturity. While I felt pressured to produce instant results and claim spiritual territory, Ray seemed content to wait on a harvest. He seemed to understand that living out your faith is often more important than preaching it every day. The difference between warriors and gardeners like Ray is significant. Warriors take territory by force; gardeners faithfully till and

water the soil. While warriors are busy attacking, gardeners plant and fertilize. Then there's the matter of seasons. While warriors press on no matter what the elements, gardeners step back on occasion. They know that working the soil increasingly leads to burnout. They understand the importance of rest—allowing a field to be fallow to regenerate itself. At the same time, they're also keenly aware of the mystery of spiritual growth. Moreover, spiritual gardening is not an exact science. While gardeners faithfully do their part, they experience peace knowing that God is ultimately responsible for the crop.

BATTLE-WEARY WARRIORS

For decades, the established Church has been on the warpath non-stop. People have heard sermon after sermon about seizing opportunities. They've bought videos, listened to tapes and filled in workbooks. And yet, like me, they've watched as many of the people they so faithfully

led to Jesus Christ wander away from the Church. Why?

After years in the battle, many warrior Christians have become discouraged. Deep down, they wonder if they ever understood "the Gospel." If Jesus is such good news, why do they feel so down—so completely exhausted—by the thought of telling others about Him?

All of these questions lead me to the conclusion that the Church today is struggling to come to a new understanding of evangelism. People are weary of the old paradigms and eager for fresh insight. Still, the process is a scary one. If the Gospel isn't simply the Four Laws, what is it?

Is the Gospel about me ... or is it about God? That's the tension. As people begin to unpackage their faith, they're starting to question whether there's more to the Gospel message than just atonement. Is it about Jesus saving people, or Jesus setting up His Kingdom? People are hungering for a story that's bigger than them—one that stretches beyond human effort and includes the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit.

If the Gospel really is more than salvation, what does this mean for the warrior? What will "success" look like?

Recently, I posted the question "What is successful evangelism?" on a discussion board on the Web site I created, theooze.com.

One response I read offered this insightful definition: posted by: camd ... Successful evangelism is letting God call the shots. Maybe I will be the person that leads these individuals to Jesus Christ or maybe not. Dialog is the first step. My Wiccan, atheist and agnostic friends know that I'm not going to smother anyone with tracts or pressure ... Evangelism is about caring for individuals as individuals.

Yet in many ways, we've approached evangelism as an aggressive business venture. The product we're pushing? Jesus. The fact is, if our metaphor changes from the warrior/aggressive salesman, our tools and tactics will need to change with it. Any curriculum written from the conquering/seal-the-deal mindset will need to be rewritten or perhaps thrown out completely—a significant challenge. We know how to teach warriors to fight, but do we know how to train and equip gardeners? It may be that gardening is not taught in a classroom, but instead learned through experience out in the fields of the world. Ever see the movie "The Big Kahuna" with actor Danny DeVito? In one scene, DeVito's character, Phil Cooper, is talking with a young, zealous Christian about his desire to "steer" conversations toward Jesus, even while on company time. The young man, Bob, says that for him not to talk about Jesus would be dishonest because Jesus is the most important thing in his life. Cooper responds with something like this: "It isn't talking about Jesus that makes you dishonest. It's the moment you put your hands on the conversation to steer it that makes you just like every other salesman who lacks character and integrity."

After watching "The Big Kahuna," I was struck by how often I too have been a salesman for

Jesus. In my evangelistic zeal, I never thought what it must feel like to be on the receiving end of that conversation, and how my desire to “seal the deal” may have actually been taking away dignity and honor from that person. I frankly didn’t realize how important it was to communicate in word and in deed—and for both to be authentic expressions of a changed heart.

A discussion board entry I ran across drives it home for me: posted by: mr_magoo ... I was raised to believe that all religions were the same and, out of tolerance, I should accept people with religious views, but I should look on them as people who are using a crutch to help them get through life ... In college, the people I ended up hanging out with were all Christian. I never once had a discussion about Jesus. I never got led into anything. Once, someone (not one of my friends) tried to have that kind of discussion with me, and it made me defensive and angry. Somehow, somewhere I moved from being a non-believer to a believer, and I really can’t tell you when. So don’t underestimate the power of simply living a life with Jesus Christ in front of your friend.

I love this post. It answers the question, “Does it work?” If we throw out our tracts and all our other evangelism “techniques,” will people still become followers of Jesus? It seems the answer is yes.

SHOPPING MALLS VS. FIELDS

So how do pastors and church leadership fit into this new metaphor and mentality? I came across this post that addresses the question. posted by: pmatthews ... The great thing about the gardening metaphor/simile is that a garden will not grow without a gardener. Translation: You gotta have leadership. It’s the way God made things. On the other hand, only God/forces of nature grow a garden. It’s total synergy.

Seems like I remember some guy writing about someone planting, another watering. Hmmm ...

Pastor and author Eugene Peterson asks the question: “Why do pastors so often treat congregations with the impatience and violence of developers building a shopping mall instead of the patient devotion of a farmer cultivating a field? The shopping mall will be abandoned in disrepair in 50 years; the field will be healthy and productive for another thousand if its mysteries are respected by a skilled farmer.

“Pastors are assigned by the church to care for congregations, not exploit them, to gently cultivate parishes that are plantings of the Lord, not brashly develop religious shopping malls. No, the congregation is topsoil—seething with energy and organisms that have incredible capacities for assimilating death and participating in resurrection.”

CULTIVATING GRACIOUSNESS

Moving away from the warrior image is difficult—more difficult, perhaps, than transitioning from any other image. Why? Because playing the role of the warrior comes so naturally to us in our present culture. Many of us have been wearing the armor so long that it now feels normal to us. We barely even notice the weight of it anymore. We’re so used to swinging our swords that to do anything else is almost unthinkable. If we weren’t warriors in God’s army, what would we be?

My mission in high school was to claim my campus for Jesus Christ. I saw myself as a commando, setting off little evangelistic bombs whenever and wherever I could. The more aggressive I was, the better I felt. Ray Bortello, by comparison, was subtle. He just gathered kids together, ate lunch with them and spoke into their lives.

Maybe it’s time to peel back our understanding of evangelism and ask if we’re really being true to Christ. What’s more, we need to ask how effective we’ve really been over the years. Has warfare evangelism strengthened the Church, or is it beginning to backfire on us?

1 Peter 3:15 says we need to be ready to “give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” Could it be that we’ve been offering answers to questions no one is asking?

In the Church today, we have an opportunity to move forward using a different approach. We have a chance to nurture new growth. That’s what’s so wonderful about the gardener image. It’s not as if gardening is a passive job. It isn’t—not by a long shot. But it isn’t aggressive either. It’s about caring for people and encouraging them, seeing that they have what they need to sprout and grow. And yet, even in the midst of that care, realizing that growth of any kind is ultimately a mystery. We have the parable of the growing seed in Mark 4:26-28: “This is what the kingdom of God is like,” Jesus says. “A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.”

Is the warrior image biblical? Yes, absolutely. Is the gardener image biblical? Yes, absolutely. The question is determining which image should be guiding us now. I suggest that now is a time for cultivating graciousness.

Remember when Peter lopped off the servant’s ear in the garden? What did Jesus say to him? “Put your sword back in its place ... Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and He will at once put at my disposal more than 12 legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled ... ?” (Matt. 26: 52-54).

The servant went home that night with two ears firmly in place. Jesus healed him because Peter’s move, although passionate and sincere, was out of sync with the purposes of God. I’m like Peter. Much of my life I’ve been aggressively evangelizing and swinging my sword in people’s faces. But the more the world changes, the more convinced I become that turning my sword into a plowshare may be a better idea for our world today.

A former pastor and accomplished photographer, Spencer Burke is the creator of theooze.com, a Web site focusing on issues facing the emerging Church. He is also the host of the national gathering *Soularize: A Learning Party*, and the founder of etrek.com, an experiential learning program connecting leaders in the local Church with those at the forefront of the emerging Church conversation. In November, Burke will be one of the workshop leaders at the National Outreach Convention. Before becoming involved in the emerging Church dialog, he spent 22 years in traditional ministry environments, serving in a variety of denominations. Adapted from [Making Sense of Church](#) by Spencer Burke

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