

# IMMERSE

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## Mourning Over Youth Ministry “Battle Cries”

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War is everywhere.

We can’t ignore this reality in our western comfort zone. War comes close thanks to instant news, relatives and friends serving in the military, and relationships with others around the world.

War is a reality in our world.

And it’s not cool—unless you’re in youth ministry, it seems.

For some reason our trade continues to think that “battle zones,” “battle cries,” “culture wars,” “crusades,” and “taking places for Jesus” are acceptable descriptions useful to inspire teenagers to follow Christ.

I disagree.

It’s time we reconsidered our use of war language. It’s too common in youth ministry, and I would like to offer a plea to any youth worker who uses war language or metaphors when guiding and motivating students to stop.

Here’s why:

### ‘Antithetical’

Look through most youth ministry magazines, and you’ll see full-page ads of students wearing fatigues while holding Bibles; or youth ministries using words such as *battle*, *war*, *fight*, *taking a stand*, etc., in their promotions. Do we ever consider how those we’re trying to reach are reacting to such language and imagery? What if you witnessed a rally by a non-Christian group that included messages stating that they were in a “culture war,” and

that they hoped to “win the battle”? It feels different when you’re on the other end of a “battle cry.”

If the way of Jesus is about going the extra mile with our oppressors, serving the least of these, praying for our enemies, turning the other cheek, and believing that the peacemakers will be blessed, then war metaphors and war language is inappropriate. The Christian “battle,” it seems, isn’t about militancy—it’s about the struggle we all face daily as we stumble toward personal and worldwide *shalom*. It’s about living like Jesus. It’s about the cross. War language is antithetical to Christianity.

### **Winners and Losers**

Battles end with winners and losers, which is contrary to a gospel that welcomes all. Jesus followers should reject actions that promote “battle lines” and undisciplined language that positions “us” against “them.” If God loves the world and wants all to be saved, let’s teach our teenagers to love and welcome all. Youth workers who use generalizations such as “all of them are...” or “they’re all like this...” draw unnecessary lines and build artificial walls that separate us from our world that God loves.

Instead of starting where Christians disagree with “the world,” let’s teach our teenagers to start with what we have in common. Don’t we as humans all desire love, struggle with fears, experience joys, and have hopes and dreams? Are Christians really that different from “non-Christians”? (Again, the us-them label.) Apart from God’s grace, what DNA do Christians have that others lack?

Let’s stop demonizing our neighbors who hold different opinions. Let’s stop treating them as enemies who we need to confront in “battle.” Instead let’s find ways to connect with our neighbors, our families, and our classmates. It’s easy to protest “them”; the more difficult path is pursuing and understanding people. Coming close transcends artificial lines and reflects the essence of Jesus’ incarnation.

### **Dehumanizing**

As long as we believe there’s a war going on, we train our teenagers to use language as a weapon and people as a commodity. War language dehumanizes people. “Things” don’t have life or context or feelings. Therefore it’s easy to rally against, protest, and battle “them.” But put a face on “those people,” and everything changes. When, for example, homosexuals become “my friend Tom” or “my sister Sarah,” we’re compelled to come near rather than protest from afar. The gospel at a distance is no gospel at all.

### **Sacrifice, not Dominion**

Some youth leaders argue that Christians are called to the public square because we’ve let “them” dominate it for far too long. But I believe it’s time

to admit that the church has lost its positional status with earthly powers (i.e., governments and political parties) and confess that we've craved endorsements from the wrong authorities.

Some seem to want to "get the power back" or "fight the power with power." But teenagers must see—through our example—that embracing the way of Jesus comes through serving our world, living by sacrifice, and demonstrating unconditional love. The Sermon on the Mount takes priority over ideological debate.

If we believe we'll win the battle in the public square, we've already lost. The public square is too small and has too narrow a vision. God desires to bring healing to the whole world. I'm convinced that the more Christians engage with God and Jesus' heartbeat, the more our world will feel closer to God.

### **Questions and Confessions**

Regardless of other's tactics, let's be teachable enough to admit that there's an element of truth in everyone's opinion. Maybe those who protest our Christian groups really have been treated in hateful ways by Christians or the church. Let's grieve with the protesters, confess our sins, and ask them for forgiveness.

What would happen if we actually asked protestors what Christians might do to make things better rather than just assuming we know what's best for them? As I read the Gospels, I see a Jesus who asks a lot more questions than simply giving answers. Therefore we should show teenagers that Christians can posture themselves humbly, recognizing that no one is all good or all bad. What we *do* know is that we're all made in the image of God, and we have much to learn from each other.

### **Culture War**

Many seem convinced that we're in a culture "war." Are we really? We can point fingers—or we can ask whether our war-like language has drawn the lines and instigated the protests.

I wonder if the true battle the church faces today is the struggle with its lost identity. We find ourselves futilely trying to recapture cultural prominence and propagate the gospel by force, power, and protest. The way of Jesus is meek, loving, quiet, and subversive. His revolution (if we must use this term) is one of love, healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

The greatest casualties may be within our own communities where divorce is higher than the national average, sexual addiction is prevalent, abuse goes unreported, church splits happen regularly, and a younger generation is leaving the institutional church in search of something real. Maybe we need to look at our own faith communities before we start critiquing others.

Further, wars and battle lines assume simplistic solutions to very complex problems in our world. Should we take a position on pornography, for instance? Of course. But let's also talk about how we'll walk with those damaged by it. Part of "speaking out" is offering non-simplistic solutions. And let's also "speak out" against materialism, consumerism, addiction to electronics, and other "isms" we take for granted. If we're really going to "take a stand," let's not be selective with them.

### **No Need to Conquer**

We fail to communicate an accurate gospel when we use war-like metaphors that contradict the very nature of Jesus. Our role as Jesus-followers isn't to "win" anything. Jesus has already made it possible for all to come to God through his sacrificial death, inaugurating God's new Heaven and earth through his resurrection.

I wonder—do we really embrace this Jesus? Or do we secretly delight in a Savior who's more "powerful" or warlike?

May God give us wisdom and humility as we discern what we're passing along to an impressionable, emerging generation for whom we all deeply care.