

Street Witnessing Rules of Engagement

Introduction

Definition: rules of engagement — directives issued by competent military authority which delineate the circumstances and limitations under which military forces will initiate and/or continue combat engagement with other forces encountered. Reference: encyclopedia.com

Instead of just reacting once out on the streets I thought this subject should be addressed. My son who served in Iraq told me the US Army's "rules of engagement" in Baghdad were good and necessary. This was to prevent true civilians from being shot and other "collateral damage". We can apply this principle to the army of God out there evangelizing. I can think of many situations when we need some sort of rules of engagement.

Out on the street there are many forces to deal with. We engage the enemy. We engage people in conversations, and we engage hostile people. We also engage other Christians too. You have to have Biblical guidelines and the Holy Spirit to prevent you from doing something that would not glorify God, or would actually destroy your witness and testimony. Charles Spurgeon was quoted as saying, "The Gospel is offensive enough, let's not add to it." Situations come up on a regular basis that really puts us to the test regarding how we respond, and our general behavior. My friend Eric Baxter had a saying; "pray that when the devil squeezes you, Jesus comes out."

Soldiers for Christ

No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier. 2 Tim. 2:4 You may be the Bride of Christ, but you have army boots under that wedding dress. If you desire to be a street preacher, then you must lose your cares for this life and get serious about following the Lord Jesus Christ. I have in no way arrived, but we need to focus on the Lord and on our ministry. I used to be a mailman for a time. Probably 70% of the total job was in the post office before I ever left to deliver the mail. If you didn't properly prepare the mail for delivery it would cost you time, accuracy, and it just would be a giant headache. Likewise, it takes much careful time preparing to go out preaching. Time spent with the Lord in prayer and reading His Word. I can't emphasize enough the importance of this aspect. Also allowing the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit to make us a pure vessel for the Lord to use; this is very important.

The Forces of Darkness

There is a host of teaching out there on spiritual warfare. Some of it is good, and much of it is bad. I decided not to get into this subject except just to say that as a Christian you are in a spiritual battle and preachers are in a heavy battle as well. *Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Eph. 6:10-12* Other scriptures on spiritual warfare; **Luke 10:18-20 John 16:11 Acts 26:18 Romans 16:20 2 Cor. 2:11 1 Pet. 5:8-10 James 4:7**

Dealing with Hostile People

"Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. John 15:20 I have found by experience that it is better not to respond to a heckler or hostile person. I make every effort to ignore and avoid this kind of engagement. Usually this works. Early on in the street preaching ministry I would have people yell at me from across the street and as they passed by. They would yell, "Shut up". I would respond by saying something like,

“I don’t have to”. After thinking about it, this reminded me of the school yard playground. What’s next? I am going to tell your mommy? That is when I decided to stop responding to stuff like that. When you do respond remember **Proverbs 15:1** *A soft answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger.* For me this is a very hard discipline. I am still capable of blowing it from time to time. Here are some more scriptures on the subject; **Phil. 2:5-8** **1 Pet. 2:21-23** **Rom. 12:20** **James 1:19-20** Here was my process; I would do all I could just to keep quite. Then I started blessing and praying for the opposition as Jesus directs. I went from not meaning it when saying, “God bless you” to actually meaning it. I think this came about by obedience to the truth. Still this is an ongoing work in progress.

Dealing with Police

A good place to start is **Rom 13:1-5** you should be well familiar with this passage. This can be an exhaustive subject by itself, so I will limit the information in this section to what I do. Before I get started I have to admit that there are times that I have blown it and have not followed my own advice. Keeping that in mind I generally cooperate with the Police, first by being friendly, and not being on the defensive. I believe in obeying the civil law unless we are told not to preach Jesus Christ. At that point I believe we are to obey God rather than man like the apostles. I have found that in most, but not all, cases the Police are ok with the Gospel being preached on the street. Even if a particular officer is not a Christian they may see the value of righteousness. Within the prison and criminal justice systems, including the local police, it has been established that the Christians believe in law and order. This certainly helps our cause.

Usually the police do not interfere or try to stop what you’re doing unless they get a complaint. In most cases I have been involved with, the issue is usually over the amplification. It has never been the content of my free speech. I have never had the police say that I could not preach the Gospel. This does not mean that they are not trying to stop the message indirectly on occasion. In most cases I have found the police to be reasonable and courteous. When the police get a call on a noise complaint they do not want to be heaving handed. Noise complaints are mundane and kind of a hassle for police, yet they must respond. Do not give them reason to be agitated. It is good not to be defensive, but rather polite, answering their questions. Sometimes it is not wise to volunteer large amounts of unnecessary information about what you are doing etc. It helps to know the laws regarding free speech and amplification. In some cases the police do not know the codes and by explaining the law to them in a humble manner, you will be able to, more often than not, stay and continue as you were.

Many times the police will ask you to stop using the amp. Because I am able to preach without amplification I often do that instead of leaving. It irks me to no end when I am perfectly in my rights and following the law and the police are not respecting that for whatever reason. However, when this happens other preachers I know will force the issue and resort to taking legal action. I am grateful for the victories in the courts concerning free speech, especially within the Christian realm. This keeps the government honest. I am not called by the Lord to fight on this level. I have decided ahead of time that if asked or told to leave a certain corner I will. Even though in the USA we have due process I have decided to take the principle given in the Bible and that is; when persecuted in one city flee to another. **Matt. 10:23** In my case, it is flee to another part of the city.

Friendly Fire

The term “friendly fire” taken from the military vocabulary is when a soldier is injured or killed by another soldier that is on the same side. This is a real travesty and yet it is part of warfare. It may never be eliminated from happening but the goal is to minimize it the best it can be. I have coined this term to describe what takes place out on the street. Many times well-meaning Christians can distract, interrupt, and hinder the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Sometimes they can even be used by Satan, as was Simon Peter. Extended grace is needed on part of the preacher to discern and respond in a God honoring way. Remember, attacks can come from within the church too.

Collateral Damage

In a military operation “Collateral Damage” occurs when other things get damaged instead of the intended target. These can be infrastructure, but we are mostly talking about people here. In modern warfare there are civilians that are not intended to be killed, but in fact are part of the loss. Again, although this is a part of warfare, the military tries to minimize it as much as possible. Besides an outright mistake, collateral damage can also occur when the **battle objective is lost**. In street preaching there is collateral damage sometimes. When this happens it is best to pack up and leave the area. I am not afraid to concede an area if things get out of hand for one reason or another. Here is an example of what I call collateral damage when preaching in public; I was with some brothers a couple of years ago preaching at an event. During this time, one of us, (not me in case you’re wondering) got on what I call a bit of a tangent and started preaching fervently against sexual sins. In particular, the sin of homosexuality was focused on. It all turned south when some descriptive information of that behavior was mentioned in graphic detail. At the time, I didn’t hear what was said until after the fact. I was not the leader on this outreach either. Well, several people including mothers of small children came up and verbally objected to that kind of speech. At that point I thought we should have left. The others didn’t feel the same way. I guess they wanted somehow to save face, but the damage was done. We did end up leaving a short time later and talked about it over coffee afterwards. I could give more opinion here but I just wanted to share a real experience to give the picture of what I think collateral damage is when it comes to evangelism.

Other Past Experiences

I learned early on in witnessing that you shouldn’t approach a person at a cash machine to hand them a tract, or to converse, until they have finished their transaction. Personally I don’t like anyone bothering me or talking to me while I am counting my money such as a check stand in the grocery store. Another issue is that the person at the cash machine may feel threatened by your presence. If you notice the unwritten code while waiting for the cash machine is that people stand back behind an imaginary line to give the person at the machine time and space to take care of their business. Some people wouldn’t like you looking at their numbers or amount of money, etc.

We all realize that salvation is the most important issue in a person’s life. For example: a person passing by with their hands full are unable to take a tract. They sometimes state the obvious as they walk by. I think to myself, “If you knew the importance of the message, you would drop your packages or whatever and pay attention by taking the tract and reading it”. If I actually said that, I am sure they would think I was crazy. Therefore there are times when I put limitations on where I will preach. I won’t preach to the people in those outside cafes while they are dining. I will not preach in a confined area like a train, or bus, however; I will preach outside of the station. In this way people are free to leave. I don’t believe in corralling them. I suppose an exception would be if we were trapped in a burning building where their death is imminent. I will not point my amp directly into a doorway. Sometimes using common sense is helpful. One time my friend and I were preaching in San Francisco when suddenly an elderly gentleman collapsed to the ground. He apparently was having a heart attack or something. I was preaching and I stopped. I said over our amp that there was medical attention needed. There are a number of police in the area and this was the fastest way to get help. After that I was just standing there watching as a number of people were already giving the man some aid. My partner thought I should keep on preaching and when I wouldn’t he grabbed the mic, and being very agitated at me, began to preach. The crowd overwhelmingly voiced their disapproval. It was a little embarrassing I thought for such behavior on our part. The same people had just heard the Gospel.

Conclusion

When you make a mistake, the next best thing is to admit it and make amends or apologies. Or do whatever is necessary to correct the situation. Many times there is not opportunity to do so.