

Praying for heaven, while we fight like hell?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

It was Sunday morning and my wife Carol was preparing to leave for church. In a light moment, we both began to sing "Onward Christian Soldiers" as she marched out the door. We both smiled, and cringed, that we ever sang this in early years. After she left, I marched to the computer to look up the lyrics to that old hymn. I learned that it was written in 19th Century England by a vicar who needed a song for children to parade into his church together with youth from another village. The pastor wanted the kids to march together in an organized fashion so he wrote something easy for little soldiers to step to. Since a cross would be carried at the front of the procession, the chorus proclaims: "With the cross of Jesus, going on before."

Though the hymnal website says the song has been misinterpreted as a military piece, it's hard to believe all the marchers tromping into the English sanctuary that day didn't think of themselves as a Christian

Army ready for battle. After all, the stanzas are quite clear this is a call to battle in a warfare with the forces of darkness. "At the sign of triumph Satan's host doth flee;

On, then, Christian soldiers, on to victory! Hell's foundations quiver at the shout of praise; Brothers, lift your voices, loud your anthems raise!" The kids – and later generations like mine – had to sense they were marching onto a serious spiritual battleground, not only against imagined invisible beings, but real triumph over real people – those who are under the dominion of Satan, the "foe" waging war against God's chosen warriors.

The third verse of this old hymn is more explicit about the Good versus Evil message: "Like a mighty army moves the church of God; Brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod;

We are not divided; all one body we, One in hope and doctrine, one in charity." We're unified in this fight alongside the saints of old, with the same hope, traditions and love exhibited in centuries past. A good thought about charity there, yet it seems odd to present this in a battle motif. How does a battling believer, locked in fierce combat with evil forces, have time to show love and compassion – to practice the words of the anti-warrior who said: "Love your enemies"?

After a particularly destructive wave of tornadoes hit Mississippi, the Governor there made several comments that caught my attention in a whirlwind of "What?" He called for citizens to "keep praying," that "God's hand is over us," declaring that people were "fighting like hell" to recover from the devastation. I always find it strange when politicians use religious language in their civil responsibilities. Those of us with some actual religious education, especially some of us with ministerial training, hear these calls to prayer or claims of divine intervention and wonder what message is being delivered.

I completely understand why people turn to faith in times of personal or corporate suffering. I don't minimize the importance of having something or someone to lean on in these times. It can be comforting to seek a "higher power" when we feel "lower power" or powerless. It's probably been true since the dawn of humankind that in the face of Nature's incredible forces we seek a Face of Credible Force. We long for a kindly, protective parental countenance we can count on in the hardest periods of our lives.

Understanding this ancient desire for divine defense still doesn't excuse elected leaders, or even clergy, from

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responsibility, and accountability, when claiming special insight into “higher purposes.” Assuring citizens of a town, blown away overnight, that “God’s hand is over them” and that prayer will make it better, ignores the fact that families, neighbors, have died and others are

injured or homeless. It neglects to address the uncomfortable truth that if God was truly watching over them and heeding their sincere prayers, the destruction and loss of life would not have happened. Maybe there was a lack of faith, or people didn’t go to church enough? A “lesson for the living?” I find that an awful response, a cruel excuse for everything from poor housing construction to inadequate early warning or delayed response. Here again, I understand the urge to say something, anything, to try to bring comfort, but appeals to

invisible forces for very visible disasters suggests that Evil is really in charge and Good is always left to mop up. How is “God’s hand” in that?

When those who pray for heavenly, supernatural intervention believe they are carrying a triumphant cross to protect them from natural harm, they may fight like hell, but make no substantial sense of the most senseless circumstances.

Chris Highland's books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” at chighland.com.