

Why Have Standards?

“Set ye up a standard in the land...” (Jeremiah 51:27). The wording in this Scripture is nearly considered archaic. What does a standard mean? A standard was an ensign that would be lifted up above the camp of the tribes of Israel that clarified identification. Each tribe had her standard as illustrated by this passage: “Every man of the children of Israel shall pitch by his own standard, with the ensign of their father's house: far off about the tabernacle of the congregation shall they pitch” (Numbers 2:2).

In ancient Rome, the troops would always go into battle with the standard-bearer. He would be a brave soldier who would make himself an imposing figure on the battlefield by draping animal skin such as lion or bear over his helmet and flowing down his back. On the end of the long pole he carried would be the ensign or standard. Sometimes it would be an eagle, which symbolized power and honor. Other standards would be the face or head of the emperor to remind the troops for whom they were fighting. One of the most often seen standards held the letters, SPQR, which was an acrostic for the Latin phrase, “Senatus Populus Que Romae” which translated into English says, “The Senate and People of Rome.” In later years, cynics mockingly made the acrostic to read, “Sono Pazzi Questi Romani” which means, “Those Romans are Crazy.” Crazy or not, they conquered the world! And part of their ability to do so came from their esprit de corps, which was maintained by various duties they would perform such as fighting with the standard.

Today in the church we seemed to have lost our standard. We have lost the uniformity to Christ and holiness. On one hand we decry the humanistic influence upon our culture, yet we negate much of our message by allowing the atmosphere of absolutely no absolutes. Recently, I heard of a nominal Christian defending premarital sex under the standard-less notion that “love” justifies it. There are websites (that claim to be Christian) not only defending drinking alcoholic beverages, but (and it grieves me to report this) they actually teach how to imbibe and enjoy. Furthermore they teach their poor misguided disciples to ignore any conviction they may feel against it as a leftover vestige of coerced legalism some parent, pastor or teacher cruelly placed us under. So instead of conquering, as we should, there are among us those who now are saying, “Those kind of Christians (with standards of life which reflect Christ-likeness) are crazy.” Suffice it to say, I could go on to list other travesties we have observed, but allow me to stay with the theme: why have standards?

1. The standard is a sign of loyalty.

During the English Civil War, Charles the King was placing his rule above the rule of God in the doctrine of the Divine right of kings. He himself was defying the document signed by King John, The Magna Carter. Cromwell and the armies of the Parliament would go into battle with a minister holding high the Bible, showing their loyalty to Him who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Loyalty to God first! In this same spirit, our forefathers in the American Revolution went into battle with the cry, “No King, but Jesus!”

On some of the ancient Roman standards would be a facsimile of the head and face of the emperor displayed to remind the soldiers in the midst of battle for whom they were fighting. God said to His people: “Set up the standard toward Zion...” (Jeremiah 4:6). In other words, lift up the standard to Zion, the place where God's presence is manifested.

We attempt to maintain a biblical standard to say, Jesus is Lord; He is our Lord and we love Him. We are saying we are not ashamed to be known as Christians. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16).

2. The standard would show the progress of the battle.

God's Word says, “Go through, go through the gates; prepare ye the way of the people; cast up,

cast up the highway; gather out the stones; lift up a standard for the people” (Isaiah 62:10). Referring back to the battles of the Greeks and Romans, they would purposefully place the standard in such a position that during the heat of battle, through the dust of the fray and often chaotic moments, the foot soldier could look up and see the standard. This would tell him how much progress had been made and often encouraged him and his fellows to press on through the fight. The story is told of a standard-bearer who had been wounded and as the opposition pushed harder, the majority of the young soldiers began to run from the enemy. While they ran in retreat, they began to cry out, “Quick, bring the standard back to the men, bring the standard back to the men!” One heroic young man ran up to the standard-bearer wielding his sword high above his head and cried, “No never! Bring the men up to the standard, bring the men up to the standard!” His bravery inspired the other troops; they ran forward instead of continuing their retreat and won the day. We are hearing the voice of those in retreat, “Bring the standard back to the men!” Let us be strong in the Lord and the power of His might (Ephesians 6:10), and let us quit running back from holy standards. Rather let us cry, “Bring the men up to God’s standards.”

3. The standard was the way order was maintained in the battle.

God laments, “How long shall I see the standard, and hear the sound of the trumpet?” (Jeremiah 4:21). As if to say, “With all this retreat, who shall stand for Me; who will hold My standard?” We see in Scripture as well as in history the horn, trumpet or other instruments were in tandem with the standard. In Rome the cornicen or horn-blower would have dressed in the similar regalia of the standard bearer in wild animal skin. The cornicen was one who had a large, winding trumpet who would sound forth to do two things: 1) to draw attention to the standard, to remind the men to look and see the progress and align themselves appropriately and 2) to issue commands to the battlefield officers. This maintained order in the battle.

Standards are codes of conduct that bring us into unity. This does not destroy our identity; it enhances our identity in Christ and for Christ. The victory came for the children Israel as a result of Moses’ lifted hands to God with re-enforcements from Aaron and Hur, to honor the Lord who Himself is the Banner they were lifting up. To commemorate the Lord as our standard, the Bible records: “And Moses built an altar, and called the name of it Jehovahnissi” (Exodus 17:15). The name means, “The LORD our Banner” which is in essence, “The LORD our Standard.” When we follow Him and His standard there will be victory, order and ground taken for the glory of God.

- Pastor Pope -

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