



NAVIGATING THE TEMPEST

By Marissa Franks Burt



It wasn't that long ago that I preferred an unplugged 1990s existence to a 2020 world. No wifi. No smartphone. COVID lockdowns invited me to put off my Luddite ways and put on virtual connectivity. I bought a smartphone and joined X (formerly known as Twitter), that modern Areopagus where people "spen[d] their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas" (Acts 17:21).

It's been a steep learning curve. The speed and reactivity of online conversations normalize outrage and contempt. When controversy quakes through a community, it sets

off a tsunami of inflammatory responses. Aftershocks of discussion follow: Has someone been unfairly canceled? Slandered? Did people respond according to Matthew 18? Responses to the responses compound the arguing.

Critics contend that public content needs to be publicly engaged, especially if it is blasphemous, heterodox, or harmful. Others dismiss concerns as "accusation against our brothers and sisters" (Rev. 2:10), naming all pushback to be slanderous. Like Paul's listeners in the Areopagus, some people ridicule while others want to engage "again on this subject" (Acts 17:32).

But how far is “too far”? When does exhortation cross the line into accusation? Church history reveals that believers have felt justified killing each other over doctrinal disputes, even as the church continued to schism. In the apostolic era, confusion and fighting resulted from incorrect or incomplete teaching, which is why most of the epistles were written specifically as correctives. Christians have always needed to contend for the faith once delivered, but we must do this without biting and devouring one another, lest we destroy each other (Gal. 5:15). Let’s take a closer look at how the early church navigated this tension.

When the apostle Peter caved to the requests of the Judaizers, Paul opposed Peter to his face (Gal. 2:11–14). Compare this to Paul’s seeming indifference toward others whose preaching was motivated by greed and self-interest: “What does it matter? Christ is still preached” (Phil. 1:18).

In other words, while Paul might have been willing to ignore swindlers who managed to communicate the gospel accurately, he refused to tolerate the teaching of those he calls “pseudo-brothers” and the hypocrisy of Peter. Why? *Because they threatened the integrity of the gospel.* Something different happened with Apollos, a powerful preacher who taught the facts about Jesus accurately but incompletely. Priscilla and Aquila took Apollos aside privately to instruct him, while Paul addressed the people who were impacted by Apollos’s ignorance (Acts 18:24–19:7). Well-intentioned people can still act in ways that require thoughtful reproof and swift repair.

What about the not-well-intentioned? The chaos of churches rife with quarrels leaves people especially vulnerable to bad actors like the heretical Hymenaeus and others who were identified by name and sternly rebuked (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17). This effort to safeguard against problems goes both directions. When Christians in Chloe’s household recognized something amiss, they drew Paul’s attention to it (1 Cor. 1:11). Paul didn’t muffle these whistleblowers but listened and responded. However, this doesn’t mean that every Christian is always responsible to personally and publicly correct everyone else.

It’s important to note that identifying problematic teaching is categorically different from experiencing differences of opinion. Sometimes people simply disagree. Paul and Barnabas were close friends who fought so sharply that they parted ways right after planning their reunion missionary tour (Acts 15:36). Co-laborers Euodia and Syntyche experienced the kind

of conflict that everybody in the church knew about—even Paul, imprisoned and far away, who rallied the entire Philippian congregation to help them reconcile (Phil. 4:2). Christians will experience conflict and need to sort it out.

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Sometimes Christians are to simply stay away from divisive people (Rom. 16:17–18). John warns against interacting in ways that could signal endorsement, and Paul tells Timothy to exhort the people entrusted to his care without getting ensnared in arguments (1 Tim. 6:11). Instead, Timothy should cultivate his own faith, root himself in sound doctrine, and pass that down.

Paul himself was contested, and he praised those who examined his teaching and compared it to Scripture and to what they knew to be true about Jesus (Acts 17:11). Disagreeing with a teacher is not sinning against them; James warns Christians that not everybody should teach because it’s a role subject to increased judgment (Jas. 3:1). Public teachers—including pastors, writers, or influencers—are not untouchable. Moreover, today’s global connectivity means the impact of any individual’s teaching extends well beyond their community accountability. If we identify all critiques as sinful accusations, we set people up as unchallengeable.

This leaves everyone vulnerable because wolves devour sheep. Jude uses the harshest of words for malicious false teachers infiltrating the church because the stakes are high: how people come to know and understand Jesus Christ himself (2 Peter 2–3; Judg. 1:4–16). Peter spends a lot of ink on severe descriptions of false teachers, then offers two short verses of direct instruction as the antidote: Grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus, be on your guard, and do not get led astray—a reminder that it’s always possible (2 Peter 3:17–18). Harmful teaching, bolstered by spiritual authority and done in God’s name, adds spiritual abuse to all manner of evil, resulting in exponential damage.

Because there isn’t a one-size-fits-all way to respond, knowing when to engage and when to step away requires discernment. When exhortation is needed, the goal is



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never to dominate, tear others down, or enable dangerous people. The goal is to build Christians up to maturity, cultivating discernment through the constant practice of distinguishing good from evil (Heb. 5:1–14). Paul told people to evaluate a teaching's merit by how it compared to what he had taught and lived out when among them (Phil. 3:17, 4:9). John, who consistently refers to all false teachers, prophets, and ideas—whatever their source—as *antichrist*, focuses on acquainting people with Jesus (1 John 2:24; 4:1–3). Indeed, identifying what's out of step with the gospel requires a functional knowledge of what's in alignment with it as Jesus himself becomes our standard.

Does the gravity of protecting the gospel give us license to demean people with rapid-fire insults? *Absolutely not*. We all must reckon with how accustomed we've become to contempt. Publicly naming ways dangerous false teaching is out of alignment with the teaching of Jesus is different from maliciously excoriating any Christian with whom we disagree. James would not have us cursing and blessing with the same tongue (Jas. 3:1–12). What should mark all Christian discourse, public and private? Truthfulness, all humility and patience, boldness, and the prioritization of those listening, that it might give grace to all who hear.

We can disagree with one another and call out false teaching without resorting to the insults to which we've become accustomed. We will give an accounting for every careless word, including hate-filled, hastily typed ones that call others *fools*, *heretics*, or *not-a-Christian*. This should sober and shape our approach; we must communicate without malice, remembering that everyone we engage is a person for whom Christ died.

This does not mean we stay silent or downplay valid critiques of harmful ideas or placate dangerous people. We are to be people who tell the truth. Consider how the leaders at the first church council practiced discernment. They listened, discussed, looked for evidence of the Holy Spirit's work, and determined whether things aligned

with what they knew to be true from Scripture before communicating their conclusion with humility and charity (Acts 15). It has sometimes taken councils, public debates, and confrontations for the Church to stay on course through each generation's uncharted seas.

This analogy of storm-tossed teaching comes straight from Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, an ancient port city. They knew something about tempests and contention: pressure from outside opponents and malicious false teachers infiltrating their ranks, tension from endless quarrels and incomplete teaching, and spiritual warfare coming from Artemis-worshippers and angry silversmiths. Talk about being blown around by winds of teaching and the cunning craftiness of people in deceitful scheming (Eph. 4:14)!

Paul says goodbye to his friends there for the final time with these words:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all who are sanctified. (Acts 20:28–32)

Paul warned that *from their own group* there would be false teachers. Even our preferred echo chambers can't keep all false teaching at bay. Paul knew the danger was real. He'd planted countless small churches and had witnessed them beset by all kinds of problems. What did

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he do? He exhorted them to be alert, yes, but then he entrusted them to God and the message of God's grace, then got into a boat and sailed away.

This is counterintuitive and yet so in line with the constant tension we find throughout the Christian life. We work out our salvation with fear and trembling, and God is at work within us. We plant and water the seeds, and God makes them grow. We keep watch and stay alert for sound doctrine, even as we are entrusted to God and his grace, which will prove faithful. Because against all odds, the church at Ephesus found their way, protecting and preserving the faith they received.¹

It's a tempest out there. From the maelstrom of social media to the floods of self-platfomed teachers to partisan winds that stoke fear and outrage, we, too, are weathering storm-tossed seas. We need each other to stay the course. We need the giftings of every single Spirit-filled believer to help us discern what's in step with the gospel and what's not, and this is the other metaphor Paul uses when he writes the Ephesians: a body fitted together in unity, growing up into maturity. Unity and maturity are connected with speaking truthful words and displacing every form of malice with kindness and compassion (Eph. 4:25–5:2). We are, like Paul, to proclaim the message of the gospel fearlessly and boldly, speaking as we ought to (Eph. 6:19–20) and, like the word of God's grace, speaking “only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Eph. 4:29). That is the kind of exhortation that will cultivate unity, keeping us alert, with our attention fixed on the instruction and

example of Jesus. This will anchor our souls in God's hope and set our compasses to the true north of Christ himself, the only one who will see us safely home.

Notes

1. Jesus commends them for it: “I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false” (Rev. 2:2).

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