REFLECTIONS IN RIGHTEOUSNESS

Escaping Combative Christianity: A Call to Gentle, Christ-Like Witness

Some Christians are better known for what they fight than for whom they love. Anchored in James 3:17-18 (NLT), this reflection asks whether our faith is drawing people toward Christ or driving them away. It looks at why faith turns into a fight, what it has cost, how the early church won hearts, and what to make of the tables Jesus flipped. With Scripture, practices for a gentle witness, and prayer prompts for the road.

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Faith OVER FACTIONS

For everyone who wanders and feels far from home.

For the ones who left when the noise got too loud, and the ones still sitting in the back row wondering if they belong.

For the solo believer, the doubter, the tired, and the ones who feel alone in a crowded church.

You are not lost. You are on your way home.
You are not the only one. This is for you.

About Faith Over Factions

Faith Over Factions is a place for the spiritually homeless: people who still love Jesus but can't find Him in the noise of institutional religion or partisan faith. Everything here is free. No email address, no paywall, no algorithm deciding what you see.

You'll find reflections, portraits of Christians who resisted when it cost them something, devotionals for unsteady days, and a private Faith Journal for the questions you're not ready to say out loud. We don't take sides in the culture war. We take Jesus at His word and try to follow Him with honesty, humility, and a lot of grace for the stumbling.

Pull up a chair. You're welcome here.

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REFLECTIONS IN RIGHTEOUSNESS

Escaping Combative Christianity: A Call to Gentle, Christ-Like Witness

When Zeal Becomes a Weapon

Open any comment section with a cross in it and you'll find the fight already underway. Someone has been called a heretic. Someone else has been told where they're going when they die. A verse gets fired off like a round downrange, and nobody involved looks one step closer to Jesus than when they started.

This is combative Christianity. It is faith better known for what it opposes than for the love it offers, and it shows up everywhere: pulpits, podcasts, family group chats, the Thanksgiving table. It wears every political color. It rarely recognizes itself.

So consider this an invitation to look. Not at them. At us.

Is the way we carry our faith drawing people toward Christ, or driving them off? Scripture asks for something harder than winning. It asks for gentleness that never lets go of truth.

What Is Combative Christianity?

Combative Christianity is a posture, not a doctrine. You can hold every historic belief of the church and still be combative. You can hold almost none and fight just as hard. Every side has its crusaders. The difference between conviction and combat usually shows up in five places:

- **The target.** Conviction starts with our own hearts. Combat starts with someone else's, usually someone outside the camp.
- **The tone.** Conviction can be firm and still warm. Combat runs hot, sarcastic, or contemptuous, and calls it boldness.
- **The motive.** Conviction wants the other person to find life. Combat wants to win, or to be seen by its own side as having fought.

- **The cost.** Conviction is willing to pay a price itself. Combat sends the bill to someone else.
- **The fruit.** After the exchange, is anyone closer to God? Combat almost never asks.

That last question cuts deepest. Plenty of us have won arguments and lost the person.

The Wisdom From Above

> *But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.*
>
> James 3:17-18 (NLT)

The letter of James is traditionally credited to James the brother of Jesus, who led the church in Jerusalem. He wrote to believers "scattered abroad" (James 1:1), communities wrestling with trials, favoritism, and quarrels among themselves.

Chapter 3 is about the tongue. James does not go easy. The same mouth that praises God turns around and curses people made in his image. "And so blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth" (James 3:10, NLT). Then he draws a line between two kinds of wisdom. One is driven by jealousy and selfish ambition. The other comes from above, and he describes it by its temperament: peace loving, gentle, merciful, sincere.

Notice what is missing from that list. Nothing about being right. Nothing about being forceful. James even says heavenly wisdom is "willing to yield to others," which is about the last thing a combative spirit wants to hear. In James, wisdom is proven by the harvest it leaves behind, and the harvest he names is peace.

Why Faith Turns Into a Fight

Very few combative Christians set out to become that way. Most got there by a road that felt faithful at every step.

Fear is usually first. When believers come to see themselves as a besieged minority, every disagreement looks like an attack, and every attack seems to demand a counterattack. Belonging comes next. Tribes reward volume. In many circles, the loudest voice proves loyalty, and gentleness gets read as going soft. Then the platforms finish the job. Outrage travels farther than grace, and the feed teaches us, one reaction at a time, which posture gets noticed.

Underneath all of it, there is often a real love for truth that has curdled. That deserves some compassion. A combative brother or sister is often frightened, wounded, or simply formed by the only Christianity they were ever shown. But the explanation does not change the effect. When Jesus becomes a mascot for our side, people stop seeing him at all. (We wrote more about that in Rebranding Jesus: Not a Mascot for a Movement.)

What It Has Cost Us

In 2007, the Barna Group asked young Americans outside the church, ages 16 to 29, which words described present-day Christianity. Ninety-one percent said anti-homosexual. Eighty-seven percent said judgmental. Eighty-five percent said hypocritical. Seventy-five percent said too political. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons published the findings in *unChristian*.

What stands out is what those young people were not rejecting. Their complaints were mostly not about Jesus or the Bible. They were about the attitudes of the people who claimed to follow him.

That survey is nearly twenty years old now. The people it described did not stay young, and many of them never came back. Some of them are reading this page. If the world has formed its picture of Jesus from the way his people argue, that is a witness problem, and no argument will fix it.

How the Early Church Won Hearts

The first believers had every reason to come out swinging. They lived under Roman rule, and in Judea that meant occupation. Synagogue leaders saw the Jesus movement as a dangerous sect (Acts 24:5). Persecution came in local outbreaks and then in waves, most infamously under Nero in AD 64.

Their response is striking. Stephen died praying for the men who stoned him (Acts 7:60). Peter pointed believers to a Savior who "did not retaliate when he was insulted" (1 Peter 2:23, NLT). They were not doormats. Paul invoked his legal rights as a Roman citizen when it served the gospel (Acts 16:37; 22:25). And they argued among themselves. Paul confronted Peter to his face (Galatians 2:11), and Paul and Barnabas split over a sharp disagreement (Acts 15:39). This was not a church without conflict. It was a church that did not turn its faith into a weapon against outsiders.

Three centuries later, a hostile witness confirmed what that looked like. Julian, the emperor who tried to restore Rome's old gods, wrote around AD 362 to Arsacius, a pagan high priest in Galatia. He wanted pagan priests to start hostels and care for the poor, and he admitted why. In one translation of the letter, he complained that "the impious Galilaeans support not only their own poor but ours as well." He credited the Christians' kindness to strangers with spreading their faith.

The church did not outargue the empire. It outloved it.

"But Didn't Jesus Flip Tables?"

He did, and this objection deserves a real answer rather than a dodge. Scripture has fight in it. The question is where the fight is aimed.

When Jesus cleared the temple, he drove out a religious marketplace and quoted Isaiah: God's house was meant to be "a house of prayer for all nations" (Mark 11:17, NLT). His anger was aimed at a system that crowded people out of access to God. When he called the Pharisees "whitewashed tombs" (Matthew 23:27, NLT), he was speaking to the religious leaders of his own people, not to tax collectors or prostitutes.

Now watch what he did when his own disciples turned combative. A Samaritan village refused to welcome him, and James and John asked, "Lord, should we call down fire from heaven to burn them up?" Jesus turned and rebuked them (Luke 9:54-55, NLT). When Peter drew a sword in the garden, Jesus told him to put it away (Matthew 26:52).

The pattern holds across the Gospels. Jesus aimed his severity up and in, at the powerful and the religious. He aimed his gentleness out and down, at the outsider, the sinner, the one with no standing. Combative Christianity flips that pattern. It goes easy on its own leaders and saves its fire for the people Jesus went looking for.

The same goes for the warfare language in Paul's letters. "For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies" (Ephesians 6:12, NLT). When he writes about using "God's mighty weapons, not worldly weapons" (2 Corinthians 10:4, NLT), the target is strongholds of human reasoning, not human beings. And he opens that very passage by appealing to his readers "with the gentleness and kindness of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:1, NLT). Even Jude, who urges believers to defend the faith, tells them a few lines later to "show mercy to those whose faith is wavering" (Jude 1:22, NLT).

The battle is real. People are not the enemy.

Gentleness Is Not Surrender

None of this means going quiet. Peter told believers to always be ready to explain their hope, and in the same breath he told them how: "But do this in a gentle and respectful way" (1 Peter 3:16, NLT). Gentleness is the manner. It is never the excuse for silence.

Scripture's gentlest people were often its bravest. Numbers 12:3 calls Moses the most humble man on earth, and he stood in front of Pharaoh anyway. The prophets confronted kings. Jesus, gentle and humble in heart, walked straight into Jerusalem knowing what was waiting there.

Resistance is not combat. Prophetic resistance confronts power on behalf of the vulnerable, and it is willing to suffer for it. Combat attacks people to defend the tribe, and it wants someone else to suffer. The first is woven all through Scripture and through church history. (See Kingdom Over Politics: Faithful Resistance to Injustice and our Portraits in Christian Resistance.) The second is what this page is asking us to lay down.

If You've Been Wounded by It

Maybe you didn't come here because you're combative. Maybe you came because combative Christianity is the reason you stopped going to church. You asked an honest question. You got a lecture. You were sorted onto the wrong side of a line you never drew. You got tired of hearing Jesus' name shouted at people he would have sat down and eaten with.

Hear this plainly. What you experienced was not the way of Jesus. He is still gentle and humble in heart (Matthew 11:29), and he has not stopped inviting the weary.

And you do not have to become what hurt you. The temptation, once you've been burned, is to turn the same weapons back around and fight combative Christians the way they fought you. That is just the same posture wearing different clothes.

If the combative Christian is in your own family, a few things help. "A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare" (Proverbs 15:1, NLT). You do not have to win every exchange. You do not have to stay in every one either. Proverbs 26:4-5 holds both sides of that tension on purpose, and it takes wisdom to know which moment you're in. Paul says "Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone" (Romans 12:18, NLT), and those words, "all that you can," admit there are limits. A boundary kept with kindness is not a failure of love.

If this is where you are, you may find company in For the One Who Left When the Noise Got Too Loud.

Practices for a Gentle Witness

Gentleness is not a personality type. It is a practice, and like any practice it grows by doing small things over and over.

Listen Before You Load

"You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry" (James 1:19, NLT). Before responding, make sure you could explain the other person's view well enough that they would agree you understood it.

Check Your Motive

Before you post, speak, or react, ask one question: is this led by love, or driven by ego? If the honest answer is ego, wait.

Check Your Target

Paul wrote, "It isn't my responsibility to judge outsiders" (1 Corinthians 5:12, NLT). Much of combative Christianity is aimed squarely at people Paul said were not ours to judge.

Go Private First

When correction is truly needed, Jesus says to start with a private conversation (Matthew 18:15). Public callouts feel brave. Private ones usually are.

Bless Instead of Blast

Make it a habit to point out beauty, grace, and wisdom where you find it, including in people you disagree with. It is hard to stay at war with someone you are actively looking for good in.

Know When to Walk Away

Not every argument is yours to finish. Some conversations end best with a kind word and an exit.

Mind the Screen

Most combative Christianity now happens online, where tone disappears and everyone is a stranger. Our free guide, The Art of Christian Communication Online, walks through how to bring truth, empathy, and grace into digital conversations. No email required.

Pray It Through

God, is my faith attracting others to you, or driving them away? Show me how to be a witness, not a warrior.

More Light for the Journey

Galatians 5:22-23: "But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (NLT). These are not optional extras. When they're missing, sound theology alone can't make up the difference.

Ephesians 4:15: "Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ" (NLT). Truth and love are not a trade-off. Paul puts them in the same sentence.

Colossians 4:6: "Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone" (NLT). Grace is part of having the right answer.

2 Timothy 2:24-25: "A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but must be kind to everyone" (NLT). Paul goes on to say that even those who oppose the truth should be instructed gently.

Titus 3:2: "They must not slander anyone and must avoid quarreling. Instead, they should be gentle and show true humility to everyone" (NLT). Note the word *everyone*.

Matthew 5:16: "In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father" (NLT). Jesus asks for good deeds to shine. He never asks for outrage.

From Combat to Compassion

Combative Christianity can win a lot of arguments. It has never been very good at winning people. The credibility of our witness was never going to rest on how loudly we speak. It rests on how well we love, and the world can tell the difference.

Picture a faith that still takes a stand and still reaches out a hand. A faith that knows exactly where the real battle is, and refuses to treat the person across the table as the enemy. That is what James meant by wisdom from above. It is what Jesus looked like.

If this stirred something, sit with it. The Faith Journal is a quiet, private place to write through what came up. And if you know someone who has been worn down by the fighting, send this their way. Let's lift up Christ, not just our causes.

Check-In Questions and Prayer Prompts

Take these slowly. Write in the Faith Journal or on the lines below. What matters is that each question gets an honest answer somewhere.

1 Where does your faith tend to come out swinging?

Name the setting: a comment section, a family dinner, one certain topic or one certain person. Be specific about what sets you off and what you usually say next.

PRAYER PROMPT

"Lord, You already know where I get loud. Show me the moment right before I swing, and slow me down there."

2 When you argue about faith, who are you usually aiming at?

Look back at the last few times. Were they insiders or outsiders, people with power or people without it? Compare that with where Jesus aimed his severity and where he aimed his gentleness.

PRAYER PROMPT

"Jesus, I've gone easy on my own side and hard on the people You went looking for. Turn that around in me."

3 What are you afraid will happen if you stop fighting?

Fear and belonging drive a lot of combativeness. Write down the fear underneath, then ask whether all the fighting has actually protected you from it.

PRAYER PROMPT

"God, some of my anger is just fear wearing armor. Help me hand You the fear so I can set the armor down."

4 Has combative Christianity ever wounded you?

If it has, write what happened plainly, without dressing it up or softening it. Then notice whether you've picked up the same weapons to fight back.

PRAYER PROMPT

"Father, what they did in Your name didn't look like You. Heal what it broke in me, and keep me from becoming what hurt me."

5 Who is one person you could bless instead of blast this week?

Pick a real name, maybe someone you disagree with. Decide on one specific, kind thing: a message, a meal, a word of honest thanks, or a reply you choose not to send.

PRAYER PROMPT

"Lord, most days I'd rather be right than kind. Give me one chance this week to be a witness instead of a warrior, and the nerve to take it."

A Blessing for the Road

May the God who sees the wanderer find you wherever you are tonight.

May Christ, who never needed you to have it all together, meet you in the questions you're still carrying.

May the Spirit steady your feet when the noise gets loud, and quiet your heart when the world won't.

Go gently. Tell the truth. Love the ones in front of you.

And when you fall, and you will, may grace be the first thing you find when you get back up.

You're Always Welcome Here

If this helped, don't carry it alone. Write your answers in the Faith Journal, free and private. Share this with someone who's wandering. And come find us at faithoverfactions.com, on Substack, Facebook, Bluesky, and Instagram.

Faith Journal

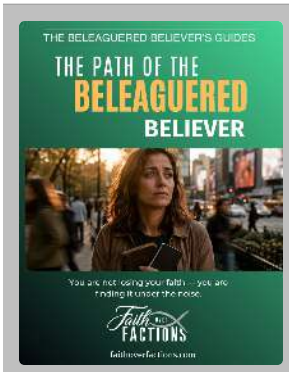
This piece online

The porch light is always on.

Take Something for the Road

You don't have to walk this alone, and you don't have to pay to keep going. Here are a few companions for the journey. The four Guides are free. No email address, no catch.

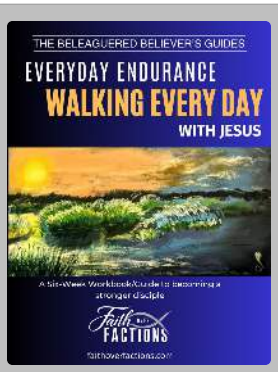
THE BELEAGUERED BELIEVER'S GUIDES



The Path of the Beleaguered Believer

"You are not losing your faith, you are finding it under the noise." For the one who keeps getting up.

FREE DOWNLOAD



Everyday Endurance

Walking every day with Jesus: a six-week workbook for becoming a stronger disciple.

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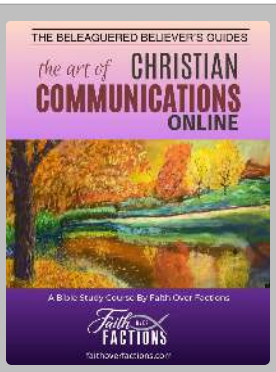
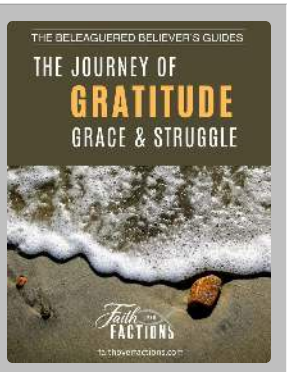


The Art of Christian Communications Online

A Bible study course on speaking truth with grace when the internet won't.

FREE DOWNLOAD



The Journey of Gratitude, Grace & Struggle

You don't have to feel grateful to begin. You only have to turn toward the One who hasn't left.

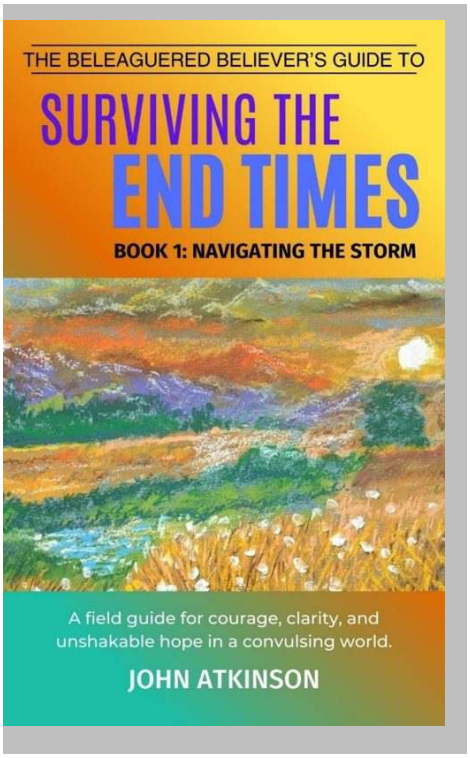
FREE DOWNLOAD

And a Quiet Place to Write It All Down

The Faith Journal is a private space for the questions in these pages, the prayers you mean, and the faith that doesn't fit neatly anymore. Write honestly. Share prayer requests only when you're ready. Free, private by default, no comment threads, no algorithm.

When You're Ready to Go Deeper

If something in these pages stirred you, you don't have to walk the rest of the way alone.



The Beleaguered Believer's Survival Guide to the End Times, Book 1: Navigating the Storm is a field guide for weary disciples trying to follow Jesus with a clear head and a steady heart while the world gets loud and cruel. It isn't a prophecy chart or a book of fear. It's teaching, reflection, and practice to help you:

- See challenges through Kingdom eyes
- Discern truth in an age of deception
- Endure hardship without losing heart
- Love fiercely when love grows cold
- Stand firm in Christ when the world convulses

Available on Amazon

Kindle (free with Kindle Unlimited), paperback, and hardcover.

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