

Coming Under Friendly Fire

When Satan Engages Us in the Wrong Battles

By Mercy Alarid



The sun had set on Allied Forces stationed in Italy on a hot Sunday night in July 1944. Earlier in the day, General Patton had ordered 2,300 soldiers from the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment to travel from Tunisia to Sicily to reinforce troops already on the ground.

Unfortunately, thousands of soldiers guarding Sicily's coast never got word that troops would arrive that night, parachuting in from hundreds of planes. What happened next became the subject of much contention, sorrow, and shame.

In minutes, planes were shot down, pilots swerved to evade "friendly fire," and parachutes slowly dropped mortally wounded and dead soldiers onto land and sea.

In his book *The Day of Battle*, Rick Atkinson recounts the deadly scene on the beach: "At last the shooting ebbed, the guns fell silent, and an awful epiphany seeped across the beachhead and through the fleet, that men-at-arms had done what men-at-arms fear doing: they had killed their own."

That night, friendly fire killed hundreds of Allied troops.¹

Friend or Foe

Friendly fire is “the firing of weapons from one’s own forces or those of an ally especially when resulting in the accidental death or injury of one’s own personnel.”² It happens often to soldiers in military conflicts. But, sadly, it also takes place among other people, who, in daily interactions, mistake friends for foes. This type of friendly fire may not result in actual deaths, but it deeply wounds and alienates people.

There is nothing friendly about coming under fire by people you rely on for support. No one is safe nowadays. This is especially true on Twitter, where people can fire off 280 bullets (characters) every time they tweet. Even Ellen DeGeneres came under attack for merely sitting next to former President George W. Bush at a Dallas Cowboys football game and then posting it on her Twitter account. The backlash was swift.³

Collateral Damage in the Church

We might expect this type of public shaming from a steeped-in-anger culture with no moral bearings. But how do we explain the vitriol launched by Christians against other Christians? Couching our attacks in religious terms, we may suppose our artillery less hurtful. But grenades will maim and kill, regardless of the Scripture references attached.

You’ve probably seen the venomous public exchanges between believers we have admired and respected in the past. Christians firing on each other over political disagreements is nothing new, but our attacks are increasingly hurting our witness and having collateral damage. When unbelievers see Christians argue that faith in Christ is somehow tied to our allegiance to a certain political party, they stop listening to our message altogether.

The secular culture’s name-calling and mudslinging has clearly

seeped into the Church. Believers ruthlessly fight over eschatology, theology, pro-life stances (or lack thereof), and oh, yes, doctrine.

Confronting doctrinal error is vital to preserving sacred Christian tenets, and Jude 3 urges us to contend for our faith. So I'm not calling for silence when our faith is threatened. But how we confront those threats is as important as why we confront them.

In his work, "Taking Theological Risks," Terry Muck writes, "We are called to reprove our brothers and sisters to keep our doctrine and beliefs pure, but we are also called to do so in love and forgiveness. As soon as we begin to see ourselves (rather than God) as the repository of all theological truth, we lose sight of our own fallibility, and arrogance and ruthlessness, in the name of God's work, can result."⁴

Scripture tells us how to handle conflict among believers. Matthew 18:15–17 forcefully pulls our hand back from launching social media "grenades," instructing us, instead, to approach each other privately. Even when it's appropriate to rebuke believers publicly, we are to do it within the context of the Church, which, last time I checked, does not include the twitterverse.

The Real Enemy

These tangential conflicts distract us from the real battle God has called us to fight. Ephesians 6:12 clearly identifies our enemy: "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Fighting each other wastes time needed to fight the powers of this dark world wreaking havoc in our families, churches, cities, and nations. But God calls us to recognize the devil's schemes and stay engaged in the right battles.

So how do we fight these spiritual forces of evil? What strategy does Paul give us? First, he tell us to put on our spiritual armor so we can stand against the attacks of the enemy (Eph. 6:11–17). Second, Paul says to “pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests” for all the Lord’s people (v. 18). In other words, instead of shaming someone publicly, close your apps and pray for that person. In John 17, Jesus models how to pray for our brothers and sisters—even in “combat conditions.”

- *Pray God’s protection over them.* Jesus prayed, “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. . . . My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:11, 15). Why do they need God’s protection? Our unity as the body of Christ has been the devil’s main target all along! If he can take down one, two, ten, or 100 believers, he debilitates the whole body and we all lose Kingdom ground.
- *Pray that God will set them apart by the truth of His Word.* Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). Here He elevates the truth of God’s Word. Building on this, the great apologist Francis Schaeffer emphasized that battle lines should not be drawn around the inerrancy of the Bible, for example, but instead, around obedience to the Bible. “I have said that [biblical] inerrancy is the watershed of the evangelical world. But it is not just a theological debating point. It is the obeying of the Scripture which is the watershed. It is believing and applying it to our lives” (emphasis his).⁵ Let’s pray that we and our brothers and sisters find great delight in obeying God’s Word.

Whenever we start to attack brothers and sisters in Christ, in social media or elsewhere, Paul counsels us to distinguish

between friend and foe—and zero in on our real enemy. Twitter and Facebook may miss us, but hell will fear us, and heaven will know us as those who take the Kingdom, not by tweet but by prayerful force.

1Rick Atkinson, *The Day of Battle* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007), 109.2Friendly Fire: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/friendly%20fire>.3Ian56 (@Ian56789), “It’s a big Club, and you’re not in it. Birds of a feather, flock together,” Twitter, October 6, 2019, twitter.com/hashtag/FakeLiberal?src=hash&ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.4Terry Muck, “Taking Theological Risks,” *Facing Theological Division* (downloadable PDF, Building Church Leaders, *Christianity Today*, 2015): <https://www.bclstore.com/products/facing-theological-division>.5Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1984), 61.

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