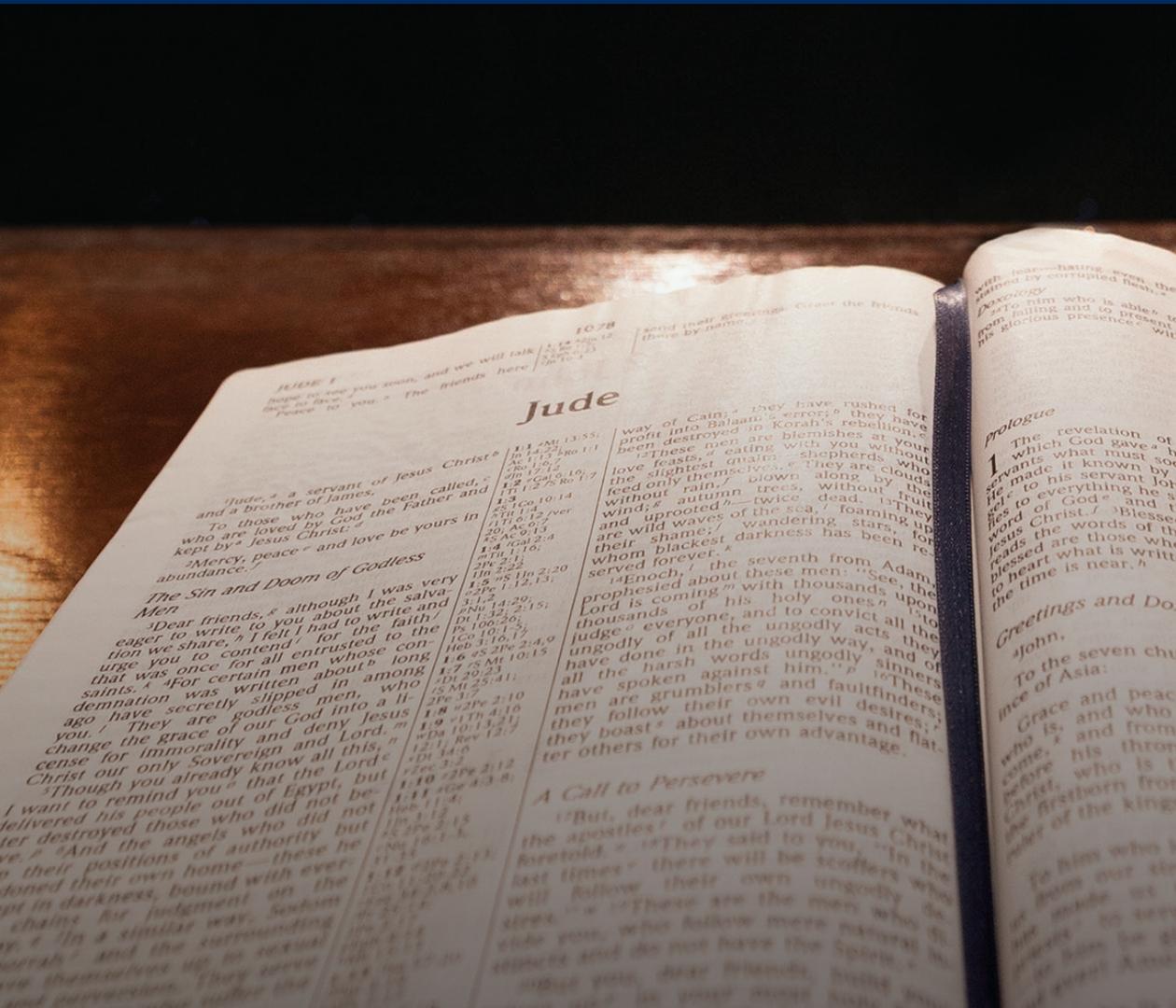


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Contending for the Faith: Jude 3-4¹

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Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into a license of immorality and deny Jesus Christ, our only sovereign and Lord (Jude 3-4).²

What Does Jude Mean by “The Faith?”

In this article, I present a brief analysis of Jude 3-4 along with a semi-comprehensive bibliography of commentaries, articles, monographs, and other works on Jude.

In preaching Jude, especially verses 3-4, one must pay attention to a few things. First, *what* is “the faith” to which Jude refers? Faith is a reference to the body of basic Christian doctrine and Christian truth. This body of basic Christian doctrine is that for which we are earnestly to contend. Notice that it is, “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” The substance of apostolic faith, this body of doctrine, is complete (Greek adverb ἅπαξ, “once for all delivered”) and must govern the meaning of the terms in which doctrine is defined and discussed. This is similar to what John said in Revelation 22:19, wherein he instructed the reader not to add to or take away from the Word.

Christians are to take the basic doctrines—“the faith”—and live by them, extracting from them further implications and principles for Christian living. They are not to be denied nor distorted. Paul used similar terminology in 2 Timothy 4:7, wherein he stated that he had remained faithful to this deposit of truth, this doctrinal core, to which all believers should adhere.

Second, doctrine must be translated into contemporary Christian

¹This article is a transcription of an address by the same title delivered to the Advanced Expository Preaching Workshop, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2-3 March 2015.

²Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New King James Version.

experience. God himself must be known, not merely the speculations of others about God. For one to be keen in understanding God's Word and defending it, one must know God. This occurs through a personal relationship with God in Christ. It does not occur in ivory-tower scholarship where Greek, Hebrew, theology, historical theology, or systematic theology are practiced devoid of a relationship with God.

Third, the faith of the church is one even though disagreements in theology exist. Consider Ephesians 4:4–6, "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." Though theologies are in conflict, the faith of the Lord is one.

Fourth, keep an open mind with respect to theologians and theologies, but hold firm to orthodoxy. Keep an open mind about the popular theologies of the cool pastor *de jure*. Study and reflect on their thoughts, but the truths once for all delivered—the basic doctrines of the faith as they have come down to us—are not open for debate as to their veracity and finality. Jude is saying sound doctrine is not an open question.

Fifth, "the faith," this doctrinal system, has two sides. The first is seen in verse 3—the doctrinal side. The second is in verse 4—the practical/ethical side. Notice how "the faith" of verse 3 is what is distorted by false teachers in verse 4. They have turned the grace of God into a license for immorality. These false teachers have challenged the faith and affected the ethical and practical life of believers. These verses present two sides of the same coin: doctrine and practice.

An appeal to "the faith" as being the essential sound apostolic doctrine raises the question, did Jesus have any creeds or confessions? The answer is no if speaking in the formal sense. However, the answer is yes in a material sense. Matthew 16:13–17 says, "When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, 'Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?' So they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered and said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.'" This confession of Peter concerning the identity of Christ is part of "the faith," the content of doctrine for Christianity.

Consider also 1 Corinthians 15:1–4, "Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures." Paul is commenting on what has been delivered, "the faith" considered and described as the basic content of

the gospel. In particular this is the *kerygma*, the gospel, which is a necessary part of “the faith.”

Finally, consider 1 Timothy 3:16. This text is a message to a young minister about the “mystery of godliness.” What follows is what many think is hymnic in structure, or a confession or creed.³ “God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.” These confessions are the bedrock of Christian belief and are the unquestionable contents of “the faith” for Jude.

Doctrinal Non-Negotiables

If I were to suggest a list of ten doctrinal non-negotiables, I would include the following:

1. The inerrancy of Scripture.
2. A literal Adam and Eve.
3. The sinful nature of humanity.
4. The deity of Christ.
5. The virgin birth of Christ.
6. The sinless life of Christ.
7. Substitutionary atonement.
8. A literal, bodily resurrection.
9. A literal second coming.
10. An eternal, literal heaven and hell.

I consider these ten to be foundational first-order doctrines that constitute, at least in part, “the faith” about which Jude speaks.

Who Must Contend for the Faith?

The second consideration in preaching Jude 3–4 is the question, *who* must contend for the faith? Jude addresses not only pastoral leaders, but the entire church. God, through the inspired writing of Jude, places the onus on every member of the local church to maintain doctrinal fidelity by protecting “the faith.” B. H. Carroll spoke of the treatment of the faith, “You betray a spirit of absolute disloyalty if you regard with indifference any addition to or subtraction from the body of truth, once delivered to the saints.”⁴ Sometimes Christians claim to believe in Jesus but express little interest in the importance of sound doctrine or its protection. This is like saying, “I love flowers,

³See discussions in George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Text Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 182–86; and I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 497–505.

⁴B. H. Carroll, J. W. Crowder, J. B. Cranfill, *The Faith that Saves: A Compilation of Pungent Pulpit Messages on the Vitalities of Scripture Teaching* (Dallas: Helms Printing Co., 1939), 135–36.

but I do not care about botany.” If you love flowers, you might not know it, but you care about botany. The issue of whether one cares about doctrine is crucial when it comes to the truth of the gospel and especially the person and work of Christ. The reality is that all are theologians, though one may not necessarily be a trained, professional, theologian. Some people are their own favorite theologians. Every Christian must be a biblically-educated theologian who earnestly contends for the faith.

Why Must We Contend for the Faith?

The third question is, *why* must we contend for the faith? Jude provides a simple answer: because there are false teachers. Christians cannot allow false teachers to do what they do. Jesus, along with the other New Testament authors, warned of the coming of false teachers (e.g. Acts 20:29–30; 2 Cor 11; Col 2:4–5; 1 Tim 4:1; 6:20; 2 Tim 4:3; 2 Pet 2:1; 3:4). These are texts with direct statements claiming that false teachers are coming and are currently present in our churches now. In this letter Jude is sounding the alarm: “Church, be aware!”

Beyond Jude’s simple answer is a second reason we must contend earnestly for the faith: Satan’s strategy to counterfeit the true faith. This is a truth that is clearly understood both biblically and experientially. One does not have to read too far into the two thousand year history of Christianity to understand Satan’s strategy is to counterfeit the truth of God. My mother worked at a bank for many years as a bank teller. I asked her one time, what kind of training she went through to learn how to distinguish a counterfeit bill from the real thing. She said, “None. A bank teller handles so much of the real thing that they can spot a counterfeit in an instant.” A true Christian, well-grounded in Scripture, can spot counterfeit doctrine.

How Must We Contend for the Faith?

A fourth question is, *how* must we contend for the faith? Jude provides another simple answer—ἐπαγωνιζομαι, “earnestly.” The root of this Greek word in Jude is a form of the word, “agony.” Moreover, the prefixed preposition intensifies the word.⁵ The term was used to describe the agonizing pain one experiences in running a long distance race. An alternate translation could be “earnestly fight,” for it is also a military combat term picturing hand-to-hand combat like a Roman soldier engaged with an enemy. One who does not stand his ground will be defeated. It is a superlative word of intensity. That is how one is to contend for the faith.

Doctrinal error must always be taken seriously and refuted in the church. In doing so, however, we must be sure to distinguish between that which

⁵Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2nd Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary 50 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 31–32; Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, New American Commentary 37 (Nashville: B&H, 2003), 435.

is false teaching—heresy—from that which is disagreement on secondary doctrinal issues. For example, consider the varying doctrinal interpretations of eschatology. There are those who hold to premillennialism. Some of these are post-tribulationist and believe that Christians are going through the great tribulation before the rapture of the church. Others hold to pre-tribulationism, believing the rapture will occur before the great tribulation. Some hold to an amillennial interpretation of eschatology while still others are postmillennial. Great debate exists among all advocates of these positions and all are legitimate interpretations, yet none should claim any of the others are heretics, apostates, or false teachers.

Disagreements do not always indicate the presence of false teachers. There is a huge difference between eschatological views that are not clearly delineated in Scripture and views, such as the deity of Christ, the blood atonement, the second-coming, or the virgin birth, that are clearly in Scripture. Denying these doctrines places one outside of doctrinal orthodoxy. Secondary doctrinal issues, however, should be discussed and debated, but we do not need to contend for secondary doctrinal issues as if they were cardinal doctrines of “the faith.” Christians must not confuse “the faith” with secondary issues that are able to remain within doctrinal orthodoxy.

When we contend for the faith, we should not do so in a contentious manner, even when we are contending with those who are false teachers. In these cases, Christians are to contend firmly but in love. We must have an eye toward reclaiming false teachers, if possible, or gaining them for the faith if they have never truly been converted.

The message of Jude is vital for the twenty-first century. Error is rampant in our churches. Truth must be proclaimed and defended. This was Jude’s burden and it ought to be ours to shoulder with him.

