

“Contend for the Faith that Was Once for all Delivered to the Saints”

Texts: Jude:1-25; Numbers 14:26-35

The first in a two part series on the Epistle of Jude

One of the greatest threats to the Christian church occurs when its own pastors and teachers deny the very gospel which they've been entrusted to proclaim. In the Epistle of Jude, we witness a church which has been secretly infiltrated by self-appointed spokesmen for God, who were advocating the false teaching that *because* we are saved by God's grace, we are no longer bound to follow the commandments of God. This is classic antinomianism. These false teachers claimed to be followers of Jesus, while at the same time were themselves engaging in all kinds of sexual immorality closely tied to the paganism of the age. By indulging in sins of the flesh under the guise of God's grace, Jude says these teachers were denying the gospel of Jesus Christ. Having become aware that this was going on in the churches, Jude writes a short but very powerful exhortation to Christian faithful in these churches to oppose these false teachers with everything in them, and to earnestly "*contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints.*"

We begin a two-part series on the Epistle of Jude—one of the shortest epistles in the New Testament. What makes the Epistle of Jude such an interesting book for us is the fact that Jude is the brother of James and Jesus. In fact, based upon the list of Jesus' brothers in Mark 6:3 and Matthew 13:55, Jude is probably James' younger brother. Since we have just completed a series on the Epistle of James, I thought it would be interesting to take a couple of Lord's Days and go through this very interesting, but far too often overlooked portion of the New Testament. It is Jude who gives us one of the most often-quoted but least practiced exhortations of the New Testament: "*Contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.*" In a perilous age such as ours, when far too many Christians are ignorant of the most basic of Christian doctrines, and all too prone to compromising with the paganism around us, we need to let Jude's exhortation to contend for the faith to ring in our ears.

Although the author of this book is the brother of James—who wrote his epistle in the mid-forties of the first century—many argue that Jude was written as much as twenty years after the Epistle of James. This would give us a date of composition somewhere in the mid-sixties, although I think a good case can be made for a much earlier date (the early 50's). Although the date of this epistle is somewhat up in the air, it is very clear that Jude is writing under a completely different set of circumstances than those facing his brother James. For Jude, the issue which prompts the writing of this epistle is that Christians are under the assault of deceptive false teachers. Believers in Jude's audience need to wake up and resist this group of false teachers who had secretly infiltrated their churches. At the same time they are doing that, Jude's readers need to make every effort to build themselves up in the most holy faith—one of the surest and best ways to prevent false teachers from destroying the churches.

Jude is writing in opposition to a group of *schwarmerei* (charismatics), men, who under the pretense of receiving new revelations from God, were defiling their flesh (a reference to sexual immorality) and speaking blasphemously about matters they claimed to understand, but knew nothing about. It is clear from Jude's comments that his concern is with teachers already *in* the churches, men whose conduct in many ways mirrors the false teaching plaguing the church in Corinth (2 Corinthians 10-12), as well as two of the churches mentioned in Revelation (Thyatira and Pergamum) who, according to the Apostle

John, were facing a similar kind of false teaching associated with a certain “Jezebel.”¹ Based upon some of specific comments made by Jude, a good case can be made that the congregation(s) to which Jude is writing were steeped in Jewish mysticism, and end-times speculation (Jewish apocalypticism). It may be the case that the false teachers were able to appeal to the congregation’s interest in mysticism and end-times as a cover so as to make rapid progress in infiltrating the churches.

Jude opens his brief letter (vv.1-4) with a greeting, and a strong word of warning about the deceptive methods used by these false teachers. Jude also includes a word of explanation about the nature of their error—using the grace of God as a pretext for immoral behavior—as well as reminding his readers of the certainty of God’s judgment upon those who distort the truth for their sinful purposes. In verses 5-16, Jude sets out what amounts to a sermon of sorts on the course of redemptive history, in which Jude makes his case that God has his own ways of dealing with false teachers, and that they will inevitably bring themselves under God’s judgment. Jude now appeals to past events in which God’s judgment falls upon the disobedient, before appealing to these events as examples of what will befall the false teachers currently plaguing the churches. Jude calls upon his reader to learn from God’s dealing with his people in the past, as a way to resist the false teachers then present in the churches. In verses 17-23, we come to the heart of the epistle where Jude exhorts his reader to remember that the apostles had predicted the very situation that the churches were now facing. In light of this, it was their duty to build themselves up in the “most holy faith” until Christ returns. And then in the final verses of the epistle (vv. 24-25), Jude closes with one of the most moving doxologies in all the New Testament.

Anyone who knows the New Testament knows that the Epistle of Jude is very similar to 2 Peter chapter 2. In fact, the parallels between Jude and 2 Peter are quite remarkable. This has led a number of critical scholars to conclude that an anonymous author copied 2 Peter chapter 2, edited it, and then circulated it as a letter from Jude, the brother of James and Jesus. Others contend the opposite—someone writing in the name of Peter did the same thing—taking the material in 2 Peter chapter 2 from the epistle of Jude and then passing it off as the work of the Apostle Peter. But there is nothing in the orthodox view of inspiration which would prevent Peter from incorporating a portion of the Epistle of Jude in his own letter (our 2 Peter). It is likely the case that Peter simply borrowed this material from Jude. Either that is the case, or whoever wrote 2 Peter was lying when he claimed to an eyewitness to many of the events in the life of Jesus (i.e., the transfiguration). The author identifies himself as “Jude” the brother of James and of Jesus—something which, if not true, would have brought howls of protest from anyone reading this letter who knew that not to be the case.² If someone were going to forge a letter like this, why use the name of Jude, who, apart from this letter, no one in the early church even mentions?

It is also important to point out that there was never any challenge to the authenticity of this letter in the early church. Some of the earliest letters of the church fathers allude to it—Clement of Rome, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Didache. Jude is cited directly by Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria. So, there is evidence of wide-spread acceptance of Jude (from all parts of the Roman world) and no one seems to have objected to this letter. From the earliest days, the church

¹ Richard Bauckham, Jude, 2 Peter, World Biblical Commentary, Vol. 50 (Waco: Words Publishers, 1983), 11-13.

² Bauckham, Jude, 2 Peter, 6-11.

accepted it as coming from Jude, brother of James and Jesus.³ Most of the arguments raised by critical scholars against the authenticity of this epistle fall into the category of pure speculation.

There is no question that the author is a Jew. Although he uses fourteen words unique to the New Testament (found nowhere else), in his discussion of redemptive history Jude follows the Hebrew Old Testament (not the LXX). Furthermore, he cites from two apocryphal Jewish writings (the *Assumption of Moses* and the *Book of Enoch*), which indicates that those to whom he is writing were probably influenced by Jewish apocalyptic (end-times speculation). Jude appeals to their interest in end-times, but reminds them that they must understand these things in light of the coming of Jesus.

As for the date of this epistle, one important key is found in verses 17-18, when Jude says, “*But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They said to you, ‘In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.’*” If Jude’s audience includes people who themselves heard the teaching of the various apostles, then this letter must have been written when such people were still alive. This pushes us toward an earlier date, especially if Peter (or his secretary) did indeed consult this epistle when crafting his second letter. Furthermore, there is also some evidence within the letter that Jude was personally familiar with his readers. In verse 3, Jude uses an intimate personal address—“*Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.*” That Jude calls his readers “beloved” (i.e. “dear friends”) and then addresses them in a personal way (“you”), seems to support the notion that although the epistle does not identify its intended audience, Jude knew many of those to whom he is writing.

With the historical background in mind, we turn to the first four verses of the Epistle of Jude.

WIn the opening two verses of the epistle we learn the name of the author, but not much about his intended destination. “*Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ: May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you.*” Jude identifies himself as the brother of James, and as a servant of Christ—a very common title in the New Testament which is used by Paul, Peter, James, and now Jude. It is important for us to notice that like his brother James, Jude does not appeal to the fact that Jesus is his brother. While Jude does mention James (who, as we see in Acts 15, is one of the leaders of the early church), Jude’s authority in writing this letter rebuking false teachers, comes from the fact that Jude (like James) is a bond-servant (a slave) of Jesus, the implication being that Jude has been divinely commissioned to write this epistle.

While Jude does not give us any specifics about the churches to which he is writing, they are likely congregations largely composed of Jews who had converted to Christianity, but who were probably living in a Gentile region. Jude’s greeting to his audience resounds with echoes from Isaiah 40-55, an indication that members of these churches are also members of the New Israel, a redeemed people whom God is keeping safe until the day Jesus Christ returns at the end of age to claim them as his own.⁴ Having been called by God to faith in Christ, and despite the fact that they are now facing real danger from false teachers, nevertheless, God will preserve them. God will do this by bringing down his judgment upon all

³ See the discussion in: Carson, Moo and Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 459-463.

⁴ Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 27.

those who use the gospel as an excuse for license. This is the theme of Jude's "sermon" on redemptive history in verses 5-16 (our subject for next time).

In verses 3-4 of the epistle, Jude sets out his basic thesis and his reason for writing. *"Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ."* There are a number of important points made here and we will spend the balance of our time addressing them.

The first thing we need to notice is that Jude intended to write a larger, more comprehensive letter *"about our common salvation."* Whether Jude ever did write that letter or not, we do not know, and this letter (if written) has been lost to us. But before he completed his intended letter, Jude received urgent news which causes him to put the letter "about our common salvation" on hold, and instead, to write this letter urging these churches to contend for *"the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints."* Jude has learned that a group of false teachers have managed to infiltrate the churches. The word which Jude uses here ("crept"—the only place where it appears in the New Testament) means that a stealthy, deceptive effort undertaken by the false teachers is presently underway.⁵ It likely that Jude's audience knew who these false teachers were, since Jude makes no effort to specifically identify them, other than to speak of them as "certain people."

The second thing to consider is that the men infiltrating the churches were probably a group of traveling teachers, prophets, and evangelists, who had recently arrived in the region and were now creating havoc through their claim to receive revelations from God, all the while they were engaging in the pursuit of sensual pleasure. In Matthew 7:15, Jesus warned his disciples about men such as this. *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."* Paul speaks of silver-tongued super-apostles in 2 Corinthians 10-12. At the end of his discussion of these deceivers, Paul writes about the damage they have done. *"I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced."* John warns of such teachers in his first epistle. *"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already."*

The third issue is the nature of their error. The fact the false teachers had arrived from elsewhere would seem to support the idea that they were Gentiles infiltrating these largely Jewish congregations and then spreading their antinomian heresy.⁶ Jude minces no words with these guys—probably the same kind of opportunists that Jesus calls ravenous wolves, and which John calls "antichrists." They claim to exalt the grace of God, but secretly turn that grace into a license for sin—not sin in general, but those sins tied to sensuality, i.e., sexual sins. The error of antinomianism is the notion that since our salvation is based upon God's grace, and not human works, Christians are under no obligations to obey the commandments of God. This is the opposite of legalism, which holds that we are saved by our works.

⁵ Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 35.

⁶ Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 16.

We know that this error was present in the apostolic churches because it is condemned throughout the New Testament. Paul warns against this in Romans 6:15. *“What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!”* Paul does the same in Galatians 5:13. *“For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”* Likewise, Peter condemns antinomianism in 1 Peter 2:16. *“Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.”*

In the case of these particular teachers, they were using the gospel’s foundation in free grace as a justification for some sort of sexual immorality. If these teachers were Gentiles, they may simply have continued to practice a pagan sexual ethic after converting to Christianity—engaging in fornication, adultery, and perhaps homosexuality—and then arguing that these things did not matter to God, because salvation was based upon grace and not the merit of good works. In doing this, Jude says, they are effectively denying Christ as their master, and they are certainly denying his authority as their Lord. These false teachers may claim to be Christ’s, but they see nothing wrong with living as pagans, and were even using the gospel of grace as the justification for doing so. This is what false teachers do.

The fourth point of consideration is that despite his urgency in writing, Jude is not surprised that this has happened. As we have already pointed out, in verses 17-18, Jude writes, *“But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They said to you, ‘In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.’”* What is going on in these churches is exactly what the apostles warned the people of God would happen. In a very dramatic fashion, Jude’s “sermon” (vv. 5-16) reminds his reader that the immoral behavior of these men is foretold throughout the Old Testament. In fact, the coming of these false teachers has been predicted by Israel’s prophets, and the future condemnation of these men has long been promised by God—*long ago were designated for this condemnation*. Jude is warning the false teachers that they must repent while there is still time, while at the same time he is comforting the people of God by reminding them that these men will indeed get what is coming to them. Take, for example, Jude’s first illustration of this as set out in verse 5, when Jude speaks of how Jesus (notice the substitution of Jesus for YHWH) called his people out of Egypt, yet still destroyed those who did not believe, which is an echo from Numbers 14:26-35 (our Old Testament lesson). The grumblers in Israel (those who did not believe) fell dead in the wilderness. So too, the false teachers will eventually fall under the judgment of God.

It is important to point out, that Jude is not condemning struggling Christians who have fallen into sexual sin. The New Testament exhorts such people to repent. In Galatians 6:1, we read *“brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”* The difference between a Christian who falls into sexual sin, and the false teachers whom Jude is mentioning is the difference between faith in God’s promise to forgive repentant sinners, and using that promise as an excuse to sin without fear of the consequences. The false teachers were using God’s graciousness and patience with sinners as a justification for sinning. In the process they intentionally distort the relationship between the law and the gospel solely to justify their unrepentant attitude and sinful behavior. Even worse, they teach others to do the same. These are the men whose condemnation, Jude says, was written about of old. Their very presence in the church constitutes a severe threat which cannot be tolerated.

Finally, we return to Jude’s comments in verse 3 about “our common salvation,” and the need to contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. The term “salvation” (*soterias*)—which originally was a term referring to the well-being of the state—came to refer to the salvation from God’s people at the end

of the age.⁷ While evangelicals use the term in the sense of “getting saved” (i.e. believing in Jesus), the biblical meaning is tied to the fact that on the day of judgment, God’s people will be saved (rescued, delivered) from the wrath of God by Jesus Christ. This is why, in verse 25, Jude speaks of “*the only God, our Savior,*” in reference to Jesus. To put in simple terms, to “be saved” means to be delivered (rescued) by Christ from the wrath of God on the day of judgment.

Jude reminds us that all Christian believers share a “common salvation.” We are all sinners saved in exactly the same way—by grace, through faith, on account of Christ. Christ’s death upon the cross turns aside God’s wrath and anger which we so rightly deserve, so that we can “be saved” from facing God’s wrath on the day of judgment. To turn this glorious gospel into an excuse to indulge in all manner of sexual sin, will certainly bring about God’s judgment. For those who teach such things and lead God’s people away from their Savior, Christ’s cross will be of no avail. Such people will face an angry God on the day of judgment. And this horrible fate was foretold throughout biblical history.

When Jude exhorts his reader to “*contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints,*” he’s using language drawn from the Graeco-Roman world of athletics. Christian are to strive, just like an athlete must do, to defend that faith which was given to the congregation in and through the teaching and preaching of the apostles—teaching which many in these churches had heard with their own ears. When Jude speaks of “the faith” he’s speaking not of “faith” as a verb (to believe) but as a noun, the content of what it is that we must believe (*fides quae creditur*, not *fides qua creditur*). In other words, Jude is telling us to contend (in the sense of striving, struggling, wrestling), for that faith (that body of doctrine and teaching) given us by the apostles. In Jude’s case, the “faith” is the content of the preaching those in the churches heard from the apostles. In our case, the faith once for all delivered, is that body of doctrine we find in God’s word written. Jude’s point is that this “faith” is a fixed body of truth, found in Scripture, which cannot be added to, nor can anything be subtracted from it.

When false teachers come around—and they will—they will deceptively seek to distort the gospel by turning the grace of God into a license to sin. When they appear in our midst, we are to oppose them, no matter how many “visions” “dreams” or “revelations” they may claim they have had. Is there anything not in Scripture which God forgot to tell us, and which we need to know that one the these false teachers can reveal to us? Absolutely not! Is there any justification for turning the grace of God into a license to sin? Absolutely not!

How then are we to contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints?

Since Jude speaks of a common salvation and of “the faith” we obey his exhortation when we make every effort to know and understand what that faith and common salvation entails. In other words, it is impossible to discern truth from error if you don’t know the truth. You know the truth by knowing your Bibles. We contend for the faith when we read God’s word, when we learn God’s word, when we study God’s word. Virtually everyone who studies American religion these days reports the same startling fact. Christians in America of every stripe do not know their Bibles. One Reformed seminary president reports that twenty years ago, one-third of entering students failed the “Bible knowledge” exam. Today, he laments that two-thirds fail it—and these are seminarians coming in from the biggest and best Reformed and Presbyterian churches. And if things are that bad with the seminarians, think how bad they must be with the typical church member.

⁷ Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 31.

Contending for the faith starts with learning the faith, and learning the faith starts with learning what is in our Bibles. But it doesn't end there. It used to be said of the Christian Reformed Church that it was a church of dairymen-theologians, and that the average Dutch Reformed Church member knew more theology than many of the graduates of the seminaries of most American denominations. Why was that? It was because of the Heidelberg Catechism. The Catechism contains a wonderful summary of "our common salvation," and it gives us a very clear and simple exposition of "the faith once for all delivered to the saints." There is no clearer summary of the biblical teaching regarding Christ's death for our sins, and how Jesus provides us with a perfect righteousness, both of which are ours through faith, than that found in the Heidelberg Catechism. Study it. Learn it. Memorize it.

In order to contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints, we (and our families) need to know that faith. If you are not catechizing your family in the faith once delivered, then someone else will, only they will use the Catechism of the spirit of the age. This is why we have a Lord's Day Catechism service every week, and this is why our consistory (pastors and elders) stress that our church families read and study their Bibles, and learn and study the Heidelberg Catechism.

Beloved, we live in a perilous age and false teachers will come into our midst. They will seek to steal your souls (after emptying your wallets). Do you know how to spot them? Can you contend against them? If not, it's time to get started. In the words of Jude, brother of James and Jesus – *"Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints."*