

Anyone for a Fight?

by David Marshall

The sermon emphasizes the importance of contending for the faith and living the Christian life, highlighting the authority of the Scriptures and the person and work of Jesus Christ as the core of the Christian faith.

Topics: "Defending The Faith", "Christian Living"

Description

David Marshall delves into the often overlooked Book of Jude, shedding light on the author's background as the half-brother of Jesus and the significance of his spiritual relationship with Christ. He emphasizes the importance of contending for the faith once delivered to the saints, focusing on the unchanging doctrines of the authority of Scriptures and the person and work of Jesus Christ. Marshall highlights the need for believers to balance defending the faith with living out the Christian life, encouraging continuous growth in faith, prayer led by the Holy Spirit, obedience to God's commandments, and hopeful anticipation of eternal life through Christ's mercy.

Transcript

(Reflections on Jude 1, 3, 20 & 21)

The book of Jude sits forlorn and neglected between the apostle John's Third Letter and his Apocalypse - the Book of Revelation. It is the second last book in the Bible. It is seldom read and rarely preached from. The scholars dismiss it as a popular précis of Second Peter. It has only 25 verses and was written by a man who is only mentioned twice in the New Testament (Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3), and since these are parallel passages that refer to the same event Jude in fact is only referred to once. Also his name actually wasn't Jude; as any Greek New Testament will show you, it was Judas. And so our Book of Jude should really be the Book of Judas, but the name Judas has such an evil association in Christian circles it has always been known as the Book of Jude.

THE AUTHOR (verse 1)

Jude, as following convention I will call him, describes himself as "a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James." There are several men in the New Testament called James, but only one of them has a brother called Jude. In Mark 6:3 we read, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas (or Jude) and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us." This means that Jude was a half brother of Jesus Christ. They had the same mother, but Jesus was the Son of God, whereas Jude was a son of Joseph. During Jesus' lifetime Jude and his brothers had rejected Jesus' claim to be Israel's

Messiah. Mark 3:21 records their assessment of him at one point in his earthly ministry, "He is out of his mind." Mind you it would be hard having a brother who was perfect; most of us had a difficult time with a brother who just thought he was perfect!

Jude grew up with the disturbing knowledge that his brother was amazingly good ---a fact which he no doubt resented. But at some point the Holy Spirit took the scales from his eyes and he saw that Jesus was not just a good man, but God's Son sent to save sinners like himself. In Acts 1:14 Luke tells us that the Twelve apostles, less Judas Iscariot, were in an upper room in Jerusalem waiting for the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit. Luke adds that with the Eleven were "the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers." (Acts 1:16) Jesus' earthly family had come together - in the faith. How wonderful when families are united in Christ.

Now Jude did not begin his letter by introducing himself as "Jude, a brother of Jesus Christ." With studied humility he described himself as "Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James." He deliberately focused on his spiritual relationship with Jesus, rather than the physical connection; because it was the spiritual relationship that was of eternal significance.

However, understanding the blood relationship does help us to understand why a letter not written by an apostle, or a close associate of an apostle, found its way into the New Testament. Jude did not just know Peter or Matthew or Paul - he was intimately connected with the Lord Jesus Christ himself - and this gave his letter an authority in the Christian church.

FIGHT FOR THE FAITH (verse 3)

This verse is regarded, rightly, as the most important statement in the whole letter. "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." Now this verse is much beloved of those pastors and lay people who love nothing better than to have a good fight with other believers. Of course no one ever fights for personal power and prestige; no one ever fights simply in order to win. It is always a matter of high principle, upon which the future of evangelical Christianity very largely depends! Now there are times when we do have to contend for the faith; we do have to fight for the truth. The Greek verb is a very strong one. If we are beloved of all men it may be a sign of weakness and compromise, rather than evidence of godliness. But, having said that, we must be sure that we really are contending for "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" - not just our preferred prejudice on issues like which Bible translation to use, what form of church government is Biblical and which view of the last days is the most sound. These sorts of things are important; but they are not "the faith." They are not reasons for us to reject other believers as apostates. They are not issues to die for. Nor are they issues to make yourself obnoxious over.

Well then, what is "the faith once for all delivered to the saints?" Jude does not define it, presumably because his readers knew what he meant, since it had already been defined for them by the preaching of the apostles. Jude does point out however, that the faith had been "once for all delivered to the saints." It was not given to a privileged class of church leaders; it was given to "the saints," that is, to all believers. Notice also that "the faith" does not change and develop over the centuries; it was given "once for all."

But what was, and is, "the faith once delivered to the saints?" I believe that it consists of two areas of doctrine:

THE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES, AND THE PERSON AND WORK OF JESUS CHRIST

The second of these areas is surely self-evident. At the centre of Christianity there stands a cross. If Jesus had not given his life upon that cross there would not have been a Christian gospel. If he had not been a human being he could not have died as our representative. If he had not, at the same time, been the infinite, eternal God he could not have died for the sins of millions and millions of people. And so his person and his atoning work on the cross is a non-negotiable focus of the Christian faith.

But what of the first area--the authority of the Scriptures - is this an essential part of "the faith." At first thought it would seem, "No!" A sinner is not saved by faith in the Bible, but by faith in the self sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This is clearly true. But, the only way a sinner can know about Jesus' death for sin is through the Bible. The cross-work of Jesus is the means of salvation, but the Bible alone contains the message of salvation. If you lose the Bible, you lose the cross. Indeed so closely are salvation and the Bible related in the Book of Acts that Luke makes comments such as "the word of God increased and multiplied" (Acts 12:24) and "the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem" (Acts 6:7). It was not that the Bible grew in size, but that the church increased in numbers. For Luke the "word of God" is a way of referring to the church, so closely are the Bible and salvation connected. We remember also that the Bible is eternal. Jesus said "heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." (Mark 13:31) The apostle Peter wrote, "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever." (1 Peter 1:24, 25) The Bible is also truth. Jesus prayed for his disciples in John 17:17, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." In addition salvation comes through the Bible. Paul wrote to Timothy about "the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 3:15) He told the Roman Christians, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." (Rom 10:17)

And so "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" must be understood to encompass both the authority of the Bible and the person and work of Jesus Christ. These two - the message of salvation and the means of salvation - constitute the irreducible heart of the gospel and therefore "the faith" for which we are to contend.

This does not mean however that a Christian should not be interested in anything other than the Bible and the Gospel message. To devote one's life to fighting for the rights of the unborn child or to the care of AIDS orphans in Africa are legitimate Christian interests; so long as such causes are not understood as being "the faith" but rather an outworking of that faith. They must be understood within the context of the Scriptures and the person and work of Jesus Christ, lest the tail wag the dog and the core message of Christianity be lost.

LIVE THE LIFE (verses 20 & 21)

There is a clear and present danger that if we get people all fired up about contending for the faith against false teachers this will consume them to the point where they are concerned only with this necessary but in some ways negative aspect of the Christian life. And so Jude wisely balances verse 3 with verses 20 and 21. He says in essence, "It is necessary for you to fight against false doctrine, but while you are doing that don't forget to live the Christian life yourself. Don't become hypercritical, indeed Pharisaical. Seek to grow in grace and the knowledge of God. Seek to exemplify that which you are trying to defend."

Christian growth does not just happen, it must be worked at. Jude gives four directives to achieve this end:

1. "But you, beloved, build yourselves up in your most holy faith" (verse 20). The Greek actually means "keep on building yourselves up." Keep on studying the Bible, keep on listening to expository sermons, keep on reading uplifting Christian literature. Notice that the command is in the plural. Jude is not talking to individuals, but to the church. Church members are to grow together.

2. "Pray in the Holy Spirit" (verse 20). By this Jude means that we are to be led by God the Holy Spirit in our praying. This means that in our meetings we are not just to read written prayers. Whether in private prayer or in public prayer we should pray for those things which the Spirit brings to our minds - taking care of course that our prayers are in accordance with the Scriptures, of which the Holy Spirit is himself the ultimate author.

3. "Keep yourselves in the love of God" (verse 21). The way we do this is by careful obedience to the moral commandments of Scripture. 1 John 5:3 teaches, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments."

4. "Wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life." (verse 21) We are to look to God's promises and to trust in his sovereign, saving love.

If we seek diligently to do all these things we will grow and mature in the Christian faith, even as we "contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints."

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