

Contending For The Faith

In Jude 3 there is a much-neglected biblical appeal that is addressed to all of the people of God. "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." This exhortation involves a non-optional responsibility for every believer. We are all to be diligently engaged in the battle to preserve and proclaim and live out a pure, unadulterated biblical message.

Why It Must be Done

The next verse tells us why we must actively participate in defending the faith. "For certain persons have crept in unnoticed . . . who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ." From the very beginning the message of the church has been threatened by subtle and quiet infiltration of those who attempt to change or deny the truth of God.

The Ministry of Reproof

Earnestly contending for the faith includes the ministry of reproof, the pointing out of wrong or error. Many Christians assume that to do such is an automatic violation of Jesus' commandment not to judge (Matthew 7:1). Certainly, we must not take the place of the ultimate judge over people's lives. We know neither the motives of men's hearts nor the measures of justice and mercy that God may unfold for them. However, we are responsible before the Lord to discern false prophets. "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves" (Matthew 7:15). We are also responsible to expose and warn against such false teaching, just like Jesus did. "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees" (Matthew 16:6).

Our Standard

Our means of measuring fruit and message and methodology in ministry is the word of God, not individual preference or personal opinion. "Hold fast the pattern (standard) of sound words which you have heard from me" (2 Timothy 1:13). Everything in Christian living and serving is to be evaluated by what the word of God has to say. This need to examine all matters biblically is particularly pertinent to the teaching we receive from church leaders. Whether from tapes, books, conferences, or church pulpits, we want to be doing what the Bereans did when the Apostle Paul taught them. "They received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). Far too many believers never measure the teaching they receive by the standard of the word of God. This is tragic,

because many messages being proclaimed in the church world are unacceptable by the standard of God's word.

The Exaltation of Self

Many of the unsound doctrines that are prevalent among the churches are related to man's desire to put himself in a higher place than God has ordained for him. Such self-exaltation was involved in the first appearance of sin in creation. Lucifer's fall came when he declared, "I will exalt my throne above the stars of God . . . I will be like the most High" (Isaiah 14:13-14). Eventually, Satan enticed Eve onto this same path of self-exaltation, inferring that she could raise herself to godhood. "In the day that you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God" (Genesis 3:5). From the very beginning, mankind's problems have been related to self-exaltation.

The Positive-Negative Myth

One example of a popular unbiblical teaching that exalts self, instead of exalting God and His word, is the "Positive-Negative Myth." This fable says that everything positive is good, whereas, everything negative is bad. The message of Scripture does not support this perspective. It is true that the Bible includes many distinctively positive statements, such as Matthew 11:28. "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." However, it also contains many other pronouncements that are strikingly negative in tone, like Matthew 23:27. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness." The message of God's word is neither positivism nor negativism. Rather, it is realism. "In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation" (Ephesians 1:13). The Lord deals in truth. Reality is what He gives us, whether it is positive reality or negative reality.

Misconceptions about Faith

In the plan of God for man, faith holds a strategic place. "For by grace you have been saved through faith . . . The just shall live by faith . . . For without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Ephesians 2:8; Romans 1:17 ; Hebrews 11:6). Since faith is so vitally important, teaching that involves misconceptions about faith will inevitably bring disastrous consequences. Some wrongly teach that faith is a force in itself, like gravity or electricity. This misleads people to 'put faith in their faith.' Actually, faith must be measured by, and is effective only in relationship to, its object. "Have faith in God . . . Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved" (Mark 11:22 ; Acts 16:31). Others wrongly teach that faith is 'a ticket to easy street.' In reality, the Bible declares that true faith gets tested and tried and purified. 1 Peter 1:6-7 speaks of believers going

through "various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold the perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

The Health and Wealth Gospel

The Lord is gloriously able to meet all of our needs, including healing and financial provision (Psalm 103:3 and Philippians 4:19). However, there are those who teach that health and wealth are available from God virtually upon demand. If you are a Christian and you are suffering either physically or financially, the implication of this false doctrine is that you are in sin or you lack faith. Such religious condemnation toward man and attempted manipulation of God is contrary to God's word. Even the Apostle Paul had to endure a great physical affliction, "a thorn in the flesh." This mighty man of faith earnestly sought the Lord three times for relief. Paul had often witnessed God's healing grace. On this occasion, he was to learn of God's sustaining grace. "And He said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Many times the Lord works in and through our lives more powerfully in sustaining us through difficulties than He does by removing them. The financial promises of the 'Health and Wealth Gospel' represent a further perversion of the Scriptures. If we heeded the warnings of 1 Timothy 6:6-10, these enticing and seductive deceptions regarding wealth would lose their appeal. "Now godliness with contentment is great gain . . . And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content . . . but those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare . . . for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness."

Psychologizing the Faith

Our culture has become deeply and extensively psychological. The weakness and carnality of the church in recent decades has allowed this psychological mind-set of the world to flow into the church. This process has brought about a redefining of many foundational matters of the Christian faith. We used to correctly understand that man's problem was sin and God's remedy was His saving and transforming grace (Romans 5:12, 17). Now, the trouble is the disorder of codependency, and the solution is group therapy. Formerly, we understood that man tended to stray from God to follow his own self-willed path (Isaiah 53:6), and that he needed to deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Christ (Luke 9:23). Now, we think that man must esteem himself, affirm himself, and actualize himself. All of this new thinking is coming from psychological theory, which is primarily a philosophy of life. We are strongly warned in the word of the Lord not to be guided by the philosophy of the world. "Beware lest anyone take you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8).

So-Called Holy Laughter

A religious craze has overtaken many in the churches. Supposedly, it is the path to maturity and spiritual victory and Christlikeness. It centers around sustained, uncontrolled laughter. At times it will include barking, growling, and roaring. The excitement and emotional release that is involved no doubt thrills and momentarily encourages multitudes who are either discouraged or are frustrated by dead and lifeless churches. However, the entire phenomenon violates important precepts in the word of God. These chaotic meetings are contrary to 1 Corinthians 14:40, where we are told to "let all things be done decently and in order." The frenzied pandemonium makes the teaching of the word impossible, even though we are instructed in 1 Timothy 4:13 to "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching, and to teaching." The incessant distractions and individual indulgences make unachievable the injunction in Colossians 1:18, "that in all things He (Christ) might have the preeminence." Furthermore, the childish behaviors of the so-called holy laughter movement are totally unlike anything that Jesus ever did when He was upon the earth, and we are to "grow up in all things into Him who is the head, even Christ" (Ephesians 4:15). Yes, there is joy in the Lord, but true joy will not contradict the word of God.

The Unity of the Faith

Many Christians wrongly assume that to contend for the faith like this is inherently divisive, and therefore does damage to the unity of the body of Christ. Certainly this is a legitimate concern, because unity is a matter of importance to God. Jesus prayed "that they (His followers) may be one, as You Father are in Me, and I in You . . . that the world may believe that you sent Me (John 17:21). True Christian unity convicts the world that Jesus really is who He said He was, God the Son, who was sent on the Father's mission of redemption. However, godly unity is based upon truth, which both divides and unites. Jesus, who was truth incarnate, was regularly a cause of division. "So there was a division among the people because of Him . . . and there was a division among them . . . Therefore, there was a division again among the Jews because of these sayings" (John 7:43; 9:16; 10:19). Jesus divides people between those who will follow Him and those who will not. Then, Jesus unites those who are willing to follow Him. The unity of believers includes the objective truth of God's word. In Ephesians 4:3, we are told to "keep the unity of the Spirit." There is already available to believers a unity that God's Holy Spirit has produced. That unity is neither subjective nor organizational. Rather, it is based upon spiritual realities that exist in common among the family of God. "There is one body and one Spirit . . . one hope . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Ephesians 4:4-6). Consequently, we must guard against those who proclaim doctrinal error, because they undermine the true unity of the faith. "Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them" (Romans 16:17).

Conclusion

We are called to be earnest contenders for the faith. This is not a call to be contentious, mean-spirited, or looking for an argument. "And the servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God will perhaps grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth" (2 Timothy 2:24-25). We must speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Harsh, unloving use of the truth of God is not edifying to man or glorifying to God. So, for the love of God, for the love of His truth, for the love of all who need His truth, let's seek to guard and live and proclaim a pure biblical faith. "Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge - by professing it some have strayed from the faith" (1 Timothy 6:20-21).