

CONTENDING FOR THE FAITH

"Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." Jude 3.

This is a very timely subject in the light of the attitude of many professed Christians with regard to the Word of God. The widespread denial and departure from God's Word at the present time are too painfully obvious to be over looked by any sincere, intelligent Christian. It is a matter of great regret to read and to hear of those who once held and heralded the truth of God, but now doubt it, and in some cases openly deny it. It is noteworthy that most of the unscriptural and anti-scriptural movements extant today were started by those who once professed the true faith. But this is not to be wondered at, for God has warned us of such things. "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of." II Peter 2:1-2.

What is to be our attitude toward the Word of God in these days of declension and apostasy? The answer is to be found in our text which says: "Earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints."

I. The Deposit.

"The faith which was once delivered unto the saints." Concerning this deposit I should like to call your attention to three things:

1. Its Content.

It is important that we understand what is meant by the term "the faith". What is its nature or substance? In the New Testament there is a clear distinction between "faith" and "the faith". "Faith" refers to the act of believing, and "the faith" to the thing believed. This distinction is generally made clear by the absence or presence of the article.

Sometimes the meaning of the word "faith" in the New Testament is subjective, referring to the faith a believer possesses in his own heart and life. At other times it is objective, referring to the substance of Christian doctrine or the deposit of saving truth which the believer has received from the Lord. Paul referred to the objective meaning of faith when he wrote Timothy and urged him to keep that which had been committed to his trust. Jude also referred to the word "faith" objectively in our text. Since its meaning was quite generally understood, Jude saw no need to offer any definitions or explanations. He knew that those to whom he was writing would readily and fully understand the import of the terms he was using.

This expression, "the faith", meant everything to Paul. Perhaps never, in all the years of his eventful career as a Christian, as an apostle, and as a missionary, did it mean so much to him as it did when in his prison house at Rome. He incorporated this expression in his second letter to Timothy. Here is his immortal sentence: "I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith." Paul was fully conscious that he had fought his last battle, and that from his battle-scarred body his blood would very soon be drained. He knew that he was facing a martyr's death. But there was no fear, no trembling, no shrinking, no regrets. His nerves were steady; his spirit was buoyant; his hope was radiant; his faith was triumphant. He had run his course to the end, and had won. He was ready for the victor's crown, and was sure of it. And through it all—from the very first to the very last—he had kept "the faith". This was his pride and

joy. In this he gloried. Through all the years, in all the places, and under all circumstances, he had preached the gospel--the gospel of the grace of God, the gospel of which he was never ashamed, not even before philosophers, magistrates, governors, or emperors.

He was not ashamed even when he was stoned, scourged, and imprisoned for his persistent proclamation of it. For the defense and propagation of "the faith", Paul had risked all. Through all the sufferings he was called upon to endure on account of his devotion to "the faith", Paul was "steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord." He refused to make any concessions to the perverters or defamers of the faith. No matter what the cost to himself, he never shrank from declaring God's eternal truth.

What are we to understand by "the faith"? It is not a set of mere notions and opinions, founded on human reason and supported by the power of oratory. It consists of all the doctrines of Christianity. The need of our world today is not modern views but eternal truths. A matter of eternal moment now and always is loyalty to the faith. The substance or content of the faith is the whole body of revealed truths, the perfect revelation of God as we have it in the scriptures. The Bible is the Word of God. It is God-given and needs no alteration or addition. "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." II Timothy 3:16. The Bible, all the Bible, and nothing but the Bible, constitutes "the faith." It offers the will of God and points out the duty of man. There is no other book in all literature like it. It has a universal message, a universal remedy, a universal appeal, and a universal application. Its theme is the greatest, its message the sweetest, its purpose the noblest, its scope the broadest, its motive the highest, its stream of influence the deepest, its light the brightest, and its voice the most vibrant in all the world. The Bible has exerted a profound influence through all the ages of its history. Its message is dynamic and its truths are imperative.

Christ is the center, the heart, the very lifeblood of "the faith". He is the pillar on which we have built and on which we must stand. "Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved."

2. Its Custodians.

"Delivered unto the saints."

The saints are those who are saved by Christ and set apart in Him. Unto His born-again ones has God committed this precious treasure for careful guardianship. It is God's gift and our indestructible inheritance. It is the anvil from which all the blows of criticism have never chipped a single fragment and never shall. The Bible is God's Word--God's revelation to man. It is a revelation of God, His character, His thoughts, His will and way for man. It is a written revelation of God's will concerning man. However, the scriptures are not immediately self-revealing. They must be read reverently and searched diligently. They do not surrender their secrets to the careless, indifferent, and the unsympathetic. They are an inexhaustible mine of treasures of truths, but those who would discover and possess these treasures must delve into the mine. What a pity that we read and appreciate the Scriptures so little!

3. Its Completeness.

"The faith once delivered unto the saints."

That does not mean merely "once upon a time," but once for all, in its final and complete form. There was a definite deposit of truth by Almighty God to his prophets and apostles and this is now enshrined for us in the Holy Bible. There and there only have we the full embodiment of "the faith once delivered." God's revelation, then, is final and complete. It can never be improved upon or added to. It needs no change whatsoever.

II. The Danger.

One of the dangers which the early churches had to guard against constantly was that of false doctrine, which was introduced by false brethren who crept into the church by stealth, probably under the garb of Christian profession. Our Lord had forewarned His people of this very thing. "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing." Matthew 7:15.

Notwithstanding the warning of our Lord and the care exercised by His apostles, these false teachers crept in from time to time and sought to corrupt the faith and to lead the saints of God astray. Paul makes mention of such in Galatians 2:4: "And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus that they might bring us into bondage." Now, as such was the case in the early church, we need not be surprised to find a similar condition of things in Christendom today. The danger now, as then, is not from the opposition of those who are outside the church but from those within.

Never was the exhortation of Jude to the saints more imperative than today. There is a widespread departure from the faith on the part of many so-called Christian leaders and teachers, and the saints of God are in danger of being led astray. In many places where once the gospel was faithfully preached it is now being perverted. Writing to the Galatians, Paul said: "Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." Galatians 1:7-8. To the Corinthians the same apostle wrote "For necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel." I Corinthians 9:16.

Let us beware of the danger of false doctrines. It comes from various sources and presents itself in different forms, and yet all combining to imperil the faith once delivered unto the saints.

What are some of the things with which we must contend today? One thing with which we must contend is the widespread denial of "The only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ". There is a very pronounced tendency to soft-pedal and break down some of the great and most vital of the Christian doctrines, such as the inspiration of the scriptures, the deity of Christ, the vicarious atonement, the bodily resurrection, and the second coming of Christ. These fundamental doctrines are not being properly emphasized, and fearlessly proclaimed, and consistently applied. The positive doctrinal note is not being heard from thousands of pulpits today. Too many preachers are concerning themselves with current events, social problems, and the practicalities, and are utterly omitting the weightier matters of fundamental Christian doctrine. The only antidote for heresies is the plain truth of God's Word.

III. The Duty.

"Earnestly contend for the faith."

Jude felt the call of duty pressing on him and his followers to guard this sacred deposit committed to them. Concerning this duty of contending for the faith, observe:--

1. Who are to contend?

"The saints." This exhortation is addressed to the saints with whom the faith has been deposited. Not to the world, or its institutions, however good and great, was this precious treasure committed, but to the redeemed who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and truth. Let us ever remain true to the precious Word of God.

2. How are we to contend?

"Earnestly." We must contend with sincerity and faithfulness. If we would contend

effectively, we must contend earnestly. The Greek word, epiagonize, which is translated "earnestly", means intense, at-any-cost, to-the-death earnestness. To contend earnestly for the faith calls for strong determination, a militant spirit, and high courage.

We must remember that it is one thing to contend, but quite another to be contentious. Some have been contentious, and the faith has suffered as a result, and at the same time their purpose has been defeated.

Let me mention a few simple ways by which we can best preserve the faith once delivered unto the saints.

(1) By hiding it in our hearts.

There is no better way of preserving the truth and protecting ourselves against the many forms of error than by a daily and diligent study of the Word of God. The Psalmist said, "Thy Word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against Thee." That is the best treasure, in the best place, for the best purpose.

(2) By heeding it in our lives.

We must not only possess the truth, but express it. "But be ye doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves." Intellectual apprehension of the truth is of little use without a practical application. It must be incarnated and exemplified in Christian character and conduct. Mere profession without practice is a libel upon the truth. Profession without practice is a menace to those seeking the truth. "The faith" is not something that needs our struggles for its support, but something that we need to support us in our struggles. The best way that any Christian can contend for the faith is to accept it in his heart undiluted, and to live it in his life uncorrupted.

"The best of all the preachers is the man who lives his creeds,
For, to see the good in action, is what everybody needs."

(3) By heralding it to the world.

God has entrusted to us His Word, not only for its preservation, but also its proclamation.

For all that under His good hand He has granted us to see of its lifegiving and liberating power in human lives we unitedly praise Him. We hold it in trust for the benefit of mankind. We best defend the faith by disseminating it, we best protect it by propagating it, we safeguard it best by scattering it. The supreme need in this hour of spiritual poverty, shallow conceptions, and weak efforts is the old, old message of God. Veneer, camouflage, and make-believe are but breaking crutches upon which falling men are leaning. Loyalty in believing, supporting, and propagating the doctrines of our faith are indispensable to the life, growth, and service of our people. May we go forth in the strength of His grace not only to contend for the faith, but to extend it, counting upon God to fulfill His gracious promise, "My Word shall not return unto Me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it."