

THE EARNEST CONTENTION FOR LIVING FAITH

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"That ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." Jude 1:3

We often read in books the praises of primitive Christianity, and there seems to be a general persuasion in the minds of men that primitive Christianity was, with scarcely any exception, of a superlatively excellent nature; and many speak and write as if the churches mentioned in the New Testament consisted entirely of such eminent saints as have never since appeared, and will never appear again. Now whence are we to derive our evidence of the nature of primitive Christianity? Our only certain and infallible authority must be the word of God; by which I mean, in this instance, the Epistles of the New Testament. But what do we gather from these epistles but the startling fact that though persecution in its most dreadful forms stared them in the face, there were some of the vilest characters possible in the churches formed immediately by the apostles! The saints among them were saints indeed; "great grace was upon them;" and their "work of faith, patience of hope, and labour of love" abounded exceedingly. This fact admits of no denial; but this acknowledged truth seems to have thrown another no less certain fact into the back ground, namely, that there were very rank tares among this wheat, "ungodly men who were before of old ordained to this condemnation;" and that these vile characters, described at large in the second Epistle of Peter, and in this Epistle of Jude, were members of these primitive churches. And thus the New Testament churches seem to have closely resembled Jeremiah's baskets of figs: "One basket had very good figs, even like the figs that are

first ripe; and the other basket had very naughty figs, which could not be eaten, they were so bad." (Jer. 24:2)

Now it appears that the discerning eye of Jude saw these evils in the churches; and that they were not confined to one or two churches, but were spread through them all. Under heavenly inspiration, therefore, he wrote this "General Epistle," so called because not addressed to a particular church, as at Corinth, Rome, Ephesus, or Thessalonica; but directed and sent abroad to the whole body of Christians, all the visible churches then existing. His mind seems to have been impressed with two prominent feelings. First, "to write to them of the common salvation;" that is, to set before them the glorious truths of salvation, common to the whole body of the elect; and secondly, to "exhort them that they should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." But why was he so pressed in spirit to exhort them thus earnestly to contend? Because his discerning eye saw a dark cloud coming over the churches. The faith once delivered unto the saints was in danger; not in any eternal danger as to the faith of the elect failing, or of God's ceasing to have a church on the earth; but in temporary danger; and that not from without, but from within; not from open persecutors, but from false brethren.

Time will not allow me to enter fully into this Epistle, nor trace out these blots in the primitive Church, these "spots in their feasts of charity." And yet it may be as well to endeavour to throw a little light on these characters, as briefly as possible, since the same awful characters infest, more or less, most, if not all, of the Calvinistic churches now; and some light may also be thus shed upon the text itself.

It is necessary, then, to observe that these characters were not casual hearers, outer court worshippers, merely

members of the congregation, but that they were **members of the church**. They were clearly in church fellowship, for they sat down to the ordinance. "These are spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear." These feasts of charity! **or love** were not indeed the same thing as the Lord's supper, but they always followed the ordinance, and none sat down at the one, who did not sit down at the other. They were therefore in church communion with the rest. They are said also to have "crept in unawares;" that is, into the church, but in an under-hand, crafty, and deceitful manner. But, as Jude has drawn their characters, we will, with God's blessing, enter a little into the description that he has given.

They are said, then, "to speak evil of those things which they know not, but what they know naturally, as brute beasts, in those things they corrupt themselves." (Jude 1:10) There were things then which they knew not, and there were things which they knew. They spoke against the one, and they corrupted themselves in the other. What were the things which they knew not? The work of the Holy Ghost on the heart, the manifestations of God's presence, the shedding abroad of his love in the soul, the application of the blood of sprinkling, as well as the trials, difficulties, temptations, exercises, doubts, fears, and bufferings, that are the lot of the people of God. These were the things that "they knew not;" they had no personal, inward, divine, experimental acquaintance with them; they therefore "spoke evil of them," and called them madness, nervousness, enthusiasm, excitement, delusion, gloom, melancholy, or any plausible or evil name which they could devise, whereby they could cast a slur upon the teachings of God in the soul. But what were the things which "they knew naturally?" The doctrinal truths which they had received in their judgment, the glorious truths of salvation which they had learnt naturally, and

therefore only knew naturally. For we must bear in mind that Arminianism had not then been introduced into the churches, but the pure truth was still preached by the apostles. But "in these things they corrupted themselves," that is, they held truth in unrighteousness, sinned that grace might abound, and "turned the grace of God into lasciviousness," that is, abused the doctrine of grace as encouraging licentiousness. And why? because they never knew the doctrines of grace in soul feeling and personal experience; but held them in a hard heart, a reprobate mind, and a seared conscience.

But they carried about with them certain marks, which Jude's discerning eye saw, and his clear hand traced out.

1. They had "**gone in the way of Cain.**" What was Cain's sin, here called Cain's "way?" Enmity against his brother. And why? Because the Lord had accepted Abel's offering, and rejected his. Thus in the heart of dead professors there is a deep-rooted enmity, inward murder, against the real people of God; and the root of this enmity is, because God accepts the one, and rejects the other.

2. They had "run greedily after the error of Balaam for reward." What was Balaam's error? Light without life, gifts without grace, slavish fear without spiritual fear, a willingness to curse, and a compulsion to bless; a seeing but not now, a beholding but not nigh, a desiring the death of the righteous, and a being slaughtered with the Midianites.

3. "And perished in the gain-saying of Core;" that is, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. **Nu 16** And what was this gainsaying? "an envying of Moses in the camp, and of Aaron the saint of the Lord." (Ps. 106:16). Thus these characters whom Jude condemns thrust themselves forward to partake of the privileges and blessings peculiar to the people of God,

aspired to the ministry, formed a party in the church, and allowed no separation of the precious and the vile; but, declared that "all the congregation was holy, every one of them, and that the Lord was among them;" and that therefore to be a member of the church was necessarily to be a child of God.

But they were towering professors, with all this enmity and ungodliness in their heart; and Jude has used several figures, which point to great appearances, but all destitute of reality.

4. "Clouds they are without water, carried about with winds." What is a cloud? A harbinger of rain, a receptacle of fertilizing moisture, suspended in the air, ready to drop down fatness upon the earth. Sometimes we see the earth parched up and dry, chapped and brown. We look into the sky, like Elijah's servant, if we can see clouds arising to dissolve in fertilizing showers. O! there we see one in the horizon, pregnant with rain. It comes over our heads. But alas! it is "a cloud without water," an appearance without a reality, covering the sun, but wanting the only thing that makes the cloud desirable or valuable. No dew, no rain, no moisture. Such are these dry towering professors. Lofty in their pretensions, but all their conversation devoid of dew or savour, soaring in the air, hiding the sun, darkening the sky, but dropping no rain, producing no fertility. But instead of quietly dropping down blessings, carried about with winds of error, gusts of passion, and the storms of their own lusts.

5. "Trees whose fruit withereth." The elect are trees, as the Spirit says, "trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified." These too are trees, but "trees without fruit," internal or external, "having not the Spirit," (Jude 1:19) and therefore devoid of his gracious fruits. But fruit they have such as it is, "whose fruit withereth;" that is,

even their natural fruit of zeal, consistency, liberality, and simplicity withered up, the juice gone, and the dried skin only remaining. "Twice dead," dead in sins, and dead in a profession; "plucked up by the roots," so that a discerning child of God sees that the root of their religion is in the flesh, and they themselves stand plucked up, and cast over the vineyard, in God's own time, before his eyes.

6. "Raging waves of the sea." The sea bears on its ample bosom the produce of all countries, and its waves bring the loaded ships into harbour. But these only rage and foam against God's tried people, and threaten to bury them, rather than bear them, though in swelling high against the teachings of the Spirit in the hearts of the elect, they only foam out to discerning eyes their own shame.

7. "Wandering stars." Not fixed stars to guide the mariner, not the polar star for him to direct his course by, but stars that wander over the sky, and therefore only deceive instead of instruct, betray him upon the shoals, instead of leading him into the desired haven.

8. But these persons have no doubt of their state, for "their mouth speaketh great swelling words" in self-commendation. They are not plagued as other men. Therefore "they feast and feed themselves without fear." They feed on the letter of truth, on the doctrines of grace in their brain, on the deepest mysteries of vital godliness held in a seared conscience. Therefore they "feed without fear." No godly fear, no trembling awe, no solemn reverence, no holy anxiety, no desire to be right, no dread to be wrong, no doubt if it be presumption to draw nigh, no groanings under inward hypocrisy and presumption, no midnight cries to a heart-searching God to see the ground of their heart, no fervent wrestlings to be upright and sincere before him, no guilt nor

self-condemnation nor self-loathing at coming unworthily. O fatal mark! O black stamp, to be devoid of that which is "the beginning of wisdom," and which "God puts into the hearts of his people, that they should not depart from him!"

Now we have no reason to believe that these characters were living in what is termed open sin and profaneness. Had it been so, they would have been turned out of the church; but it is evident that when Jude wrote, they were still in church membership. Their sins therefore were carried on in secret. But Jude's discerning eye, enlightened by the blessed Spirit, saw through all their hypocrisy, and penetrated into their real character, through all their "changeable suits of apparel, veils, wimples, and mantles." He saw then that the faith was in jeopardy, and observing this dark cloud lowering over the churches, wrote this epistle to exhort those that were "sanctified by God the Father, preserved in Christ Jesus, and called," to "contend earnestly for the faith once delivered unto the saints." And are times less perilous now? Do not the churches amongst whom the bulk of God's people are swarm with the very same characters that Jude here points out? The saints of God, then, are similarly called upon now to "contend earnestly for the faith once delivered unto the saints."

Thus much for introduction, long indeed but perhaps not unnecessary, considering the light it may throw on the text.

And now we come to our text; and the first word which seems to demand our notice, is the expression, "faith;" for on that word as on a pivot the whole text seems to turn.

I think we may understand two things by the expression, "the faith once delivered to the saints," **first**, the doctrines preached by the apostles, and **secondly**, that inward faith whereby these doctrines are believed in by the heart unto

righteousness, and confession made of them by the mouth unto salvation. The doctrines of grace were delivered to the saints by the Lord and his apostles: they were entrusted to the saints as to a living repository, and by them they were to be handed down to those who followed them in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ. This seems to be the prominent and primary meaning of the text. But on that I shall not this morning dwell, but shall confine myself to what I consider its secondary and no less important meaning—the faith that dwells in the heart of the manifested people of God.

Now in examining the faith thus spoken of, it may be as well to see **what it is not**, before we look at **what it is**. The faith, then, which is delivered into the heart of the saints from the mouth of the Lord is not, in the least respect or degree, the fruit or production of the creature. "That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God." (1 Cor. 2:5) It is a faith not to be learnt of man, nor to be procured by the exertions and strivings of the flesh. It cannot be got from the scriptures by hard study; nay, all the exertion of the creature cannot bring into the heart one grain or atom of it. Natural faith, believing traditionally in the scriptures, receiving them as a divine revelation upon the authority of others, and a bare intellectual knowledge of texts and passages, doctrines and mysteries, all fall infinitely short of the saving faith which God communicates to his elect.

The faith delivered unto the saints stands wholly and solely in the power of God. He is the author and finisher of it in the soul; nor have we one jot more, nor one jot less than he is pleased to communicate. This heavenly grace is breathed into the soul by God the Holy Ghost out of the fulness of the Son of God. "We are the clay, and He is the potter;" and so far as we are vessels of mercy, "we are the work of his

hand." This faith, then, can only be known by an inward experimental possession of it, and all description of it must fall short of what it really is in soul feeling. Now this faith is breathed into the soul when the Holy Ghost first quickens it into spiritual and eternal life; and the work and province of this faith is to lay hold of, embrace, and realize those truths which the Holy Spirit lodges in the conscience. For it is "the substance of things hoped for." That Almighty teacher casts a divine light upon certain revealed truths, and brings them out of the word into the heart, where they are fastened and riveted by an almighty power. And faith's business and employment is to act upon, and solemnly deal with these truths, which the Holy Spirit thus brings in and makes known. Faith, therefore, does not sail forth upon the letter of God's word, that vast and fathomless ocean of truth. Faith stays at home, and does as Mary did, "ponder these things in her heart." All that comes with light, life, and power, all that is commended to the conscience, all that is experimentally brought into the heart, faith deals with. Whatever truth comes with power from God into the soul is faith's food, and true faith can feed on nothing else. But here many of God's children are often staggered. They read in the word what faith is, and what faith does: as for instance, that it removes mountains, works by love, overcomes the world, purifies the heart, and is accompanied with love, joy, and peace. Such a faith as this many of God's people cannot find in their heart. Again, they see glorious truths set forth in the letter of the word. They see Jesus there spoken of as a great and glorious Saviour. The security of the church in her covenant Head, the solemn truths of election and predestination, the certainty of salvation to the elect, the blessed teachings of the Spirit in the hearts of God's people, these and other divine truths, many of the quickened family of God see clearly written in the scriptures. But they cannot get at them, so as to realize them as certainly and eternally theirs. They believe that they

are true; but they cannot believe them for themselves, so as to rejoice in them as sealed with power in their own hearts. Now here they are baffled; and feeling that their faith does not relieve them from burdens, remove guilt, pacify conscience, and conquer death, they conclude because they have not **this** faith, that they have no faith.

But is this the necessary, or scriptural conclusion? If faith can only realize, and feed upon the truths which the Holy Ghost brings in, faith in its beginning will deal with what is brought in at the beginning. Now what is a sound beginning? "The fear of the Lord," for that is declared to be "the beginning of wisdom." (Ps. 111:10) But the fear of God cannot exist without the knowledge of God, for we cannot fear him whom we do not know. Therefore the Lord Jesus said, "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent." Faith then, in its early infantile state, acts upon, and is engaged with this inward knowledge of God, which springs from what the Holy Ghost has revealed of him to the conscience. But this knowledge of God embraces the knowledge of what God is, of his holiness, purity, power, justice, hatred of sin, and eternal wrath and displeasure towards transgressors. And as we see light only in God's light, when He sets our secret sins in the light of His countenance, faith begins to act upon, and deal with these eternal realities. Thus the soul is convinced of sin, made acquainted with the spirituality of God's law, and arraigned at his bar as a transgressor. Under this discovery, sin and corruption work, temptations beset the soul, doubts and fears arise, and guilt and condemnation are powerfully felt. Well, but where is faith all this time? Out of sight indeed, but not out of the heart; nay, busy at work, and dealing with these solemn realities, as the Holy Spirit keeps bringing them in. But how is faith evidenced? By feeling. Were there no faith, there would be no feeling. But the presence of feeling

shows the presence of faith. Thus the very guilt that the soul feels, the earnest anxiety which it manifests in fleeing from the wrath to come, its groans and sighs for mercy, its struggling forward into light and liberty, as the babe from the prison of the womb, the very doubts and fears that retard its progress, and all the numerous and varied exercises that attend the quickened soul, all, all manifest the presence of faith. Eternal realities are believed in, and from this belief all these inward exercises spring.

Now after a time, there shall be a change. The Holy Spirit holds up Jesus in the word as a suitable and precious Saviour, and brings into the heart some savour of his Person, work, and precious blood. Faith, as before, sees, realises, and feeds upon this heavenly food. What the Spirit reveals, faith embraces, deals with, and acts upon. Perfect love indeed has not yet come to cast out all "fear which hath torment." But a measure of peace is felt in believing, and faith has at times something more of a comforting nature to feed upon.

It is usually at this season that we are exposed to, and are often entangled by Satan, false professors, and the deceit of our own heart. On one side of the path of life is despair, and on the other side is presumption, two deep ditches, into one or the other of which we are very liable to fall. The soul, then, being somewhat lifted up with views of Christ, often runs eagerly forward, and thus is thrust beyond its real experience. Confident professors always on the rock, preachers crying out against doubts and fears, and the heart's own deceitfulness, all push the unwary child of God forward into head knowledge beyond heart knowledge. One does not like to be snuffed at and snubbed by professors, looked down upon with suspicion, and treated as a babe, a weakling, a beginner, and all one's religion perhaps called in

question by those who have no doubt of their own. The flesh is pained thereby, galled, fretted, and mortified. So having some little ground to go upon, the inexperienced and perhaps unballasted vessel of mercy, unless well held in, starts forth into the letter of God's word, to sail on that wide and boundless ocean, without either chart, compass, or rudder. But let a man once go beyond God's teaching, and where will he not get to, unless the Lord bring him back? Well, on the stripling goes, pretty boldly and pretty firmly. Light and life received, with rays of hope and consolation, give him some entrance into the doctrines of grace, into which therefore he boldly steps. Doubts and fears begin to remove, trials and temptations lose their sharp edge, and a temporary ease and consolation are felt. This emboldens him yet more to go farther and farther still with confidence and assurance, as he now finds some comfort and security more and more drawn from the letter of truth. Now, if the Holy Ghost did not keep him, he would rush forward into all the hardened confidence of a dead professor. But the Lord never has left, and never will leave him; nor was he really easy with all his false confidence. Some heavy trial, some powerful temptation, a bed of sickness, such as I believe was made useful in this way to me ten years ago, death near, and hell in sight, begin to pull down this vain confidence. The soul loses all its fancied treasures and supposed acquirements, and sinks into poverty and beggary. False hopes begin to vanish, rotten props to be knocked away, and refuges of lies to be discovered. Towering confidence flies away, and the soul falls down into darkness, and well nigh into despair. But why all this? What is the Lord doing now? Why, teaching the soul what faith is, by teaching him what faith is not. He had been making bricks, and collecting slime to build up a Babel with, to escape the wrath to come; touching the ark with Uzzah, looking into it presumptuously with the men of Bethshemesh. Now faith comes back to her true old work, to stay at home,

and ponder the things inwardly felt. Our religion is now weighed up, and much, perhaps all, to our feelings, found false. The greater part of it stood in the flesh in more or less of presumption. Now then the soul is driven to close dealings with God, forced up into a corner, whence there is no escape. Before, whilst the soul was in an easy, smooth, lukewarm path, there were few or no close dealings with God. There were indeed seasons of prayer, moments of compunction and contrition, but no close, solemn, personal dealings with a heart-searching Jehovah. Hezekiah was a good man, and had offered an acceptable passover, as well as received answers to prayer and a striking deliverance before ever "he turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto the Lord, and wept sore." But he never had close dealings with God, until he had sentence of death in his soul. This pulled down all his religion, stripped away his fleshly hopes, and drove him up into a corner. But where is faith now? Why, busy with the perfections of God, his majesty, heart-searching eye, and unalterable purposes, and suing, sighing, and groaning after manifestations of mercy. It is not falling on one's knees, nor uttering prayers merely, that is close dealing with God; nor do I believe there are any of these close quarters until the soul is stripped and laid low. Now it comes as a sinner ready to perish, as a poor outcast, who must have mercy inwardly revealed. Like the poor woman diseased with the issue of blood, it longs to touch the hem of Jesus' garment. In this conflict the soul learns what faith is. Hezekiah was brought to feel that "by these things men live, and in all these things was the life of his spirit."

Under these sharp exercises we learn what faith is, and what faith is not; what faith does, and what faith does not. The dross and tin are purged away in this furnace, and in it faith learns its real measure and stature, its true work and business. The soul is taught in the fires to seek and sue after

personal manifestations of mercy, is brought off the bare letter of the word, and breathes after the teachings of the blessed Spirit as applying the scriptures with power. What it now therefore receives, it receives as a free gift, for which it must sigh, beg, and groan. Its faith can only stand now in the power of God, and is utterly helpless without him. And when the Lord in mercy sends help and strength, power and feeling, and draws up the affections to himself, the soul knows what faith is, by its presence as well as by its absence; by what it can do, as well as by what it cannot do. Thus according to the measure given, the heart is purified, the love of the world cast out, fleshly religion dethroned, and Christ made all in all. There is now a solid acquaintance with the truth, and the poor, needy, naked, and helpless soul rests and hangs upon Christ alone. This faith, according to its different measure in each, was once delivered unto the saints, delivered, not merely in the preaching of Christ and his apostles, but delivered into their hearts. For this faith then we are earnestly to contend, as an abiding reality, a separating path between presumption and despair. A faith which stands wholly and solely in the teachings, guidings, and leadings of the Holy Comforter, and received only in such measure, and at such seasons as He delivers it into the heart. But why earnestly contend for it? Why not have peace in churches, smuggle matters up, put goats and sheep into one pen, and so preach and talk as to have a good name among professors? Why not call all that profess, "brethren," and keep things quiet and comfortable? Because having more or less proved the nature of this faith in our own souls, and seen the deceits and dangers of all counterfeits, we must earnestly contend for it. And what then? Why, we must have divisions, troubles, and difficulties. Contend we must therefore for this faith, not bitterly nor angrily, but earnestly and affectionately; contend for it as a thing of infinite importance, as the only thing really worth contending for;

contend for it through smiles and frowns, whether men will hear or forbear.

Jude does not say, Contend for church order, though a good thing in its place; nor for doctrines, though true and valuable; nor for your own reputation, though personally dear; but, "for the faith once delivered unto the saints." Because it has made us, each according to our measure, new creatures, wrought an effect on our souls, and upon the possession of it hang our hopes of eternity; because it is the grand turning point between sinner and saint, between life and death. All the people of God quickened into spiritual life have faith, the weakest as well as the strongest; the babe of yesterday as well as the saint of a fifty years' profession. Their faith differs in measure, not in kind. To contend therefore for divine faith, is to embrace all the living family, and reject all dead professors. If therefore we contend for it, we must give place to its opposers, no, not for an hour. We must make no hollow truces, no false treaties, no rotten alliances and give no quarter to any faith that stands not in the power of God the Holy Ghost. We must allow none to have a grain of real religion, who possess it not. My conscience would condemn me if I did not contend for it earnestly, but my conscience would equally condemn me if I were to contend for it bitterly. I trust in this spirit I have come to Leicester. I feel that I have not come here to oppose any man, or disparage any man, to minister to any man's pride, to set any man up, or pull any man down. So far as I know my own motives, **and our hearts are so deceitful that it is hard always to know them** I have come here with a desire after God's glory. Films will come over the eye, when we think and wish it to be most single; but I have felt, that there being a door opened in this town for experimental truth, a chapel built, and a pulpit set up, I could comfortably and conscientiously enter it to "contend earnestly for the faith once delivered unto the saints." God will own and bless

no other cause and no other preaching but that which contends for the faith that He himself once delivered. I desire to contend for it earnestly, simply, fully and affectionately; and may we ever contend for it at home and abroad, in our words and actions, as well as in our life, conduct, and conversation.

In this mixed multitude there must be persons assembled from various motives. Some to hear a new preacher, some to pick up something from the pulpit which they may carry away to make me an offender for a word, some to see the new chapel, and some, I trust, to hear what the Lord may speak to their soul. To the last I would by way of conclusion address myself.

If you have any measure of this spiritual faith, you will have plenty of trials with it. The Lord says—Rev. 3:18, "I counsel thee to buy of me gold;" but what gold? "tried in the fire," no other. Wherever, therefore, the Lord gives faith, he gives trials to prove it. "That the trial of your faith being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire" (1 Pet. 1:7) Thus we are tried with unbelief, infidelity, doubts, questionings, and fears tried in providence; tried by bodily afflictions; tried by the enmity of the world, the opposition of carnal professors, the deceit of false friends, but most of all by our own dreadfully vile and wicked hearts. And yet, with all these trials some more and some less, all who have any measure of this heavenly faith will and must earnestly contend for it, as the only thing that supports the soul under trials, and as feeling that this faith only "will be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ." You therefore, into whose heart God has breathed this faith, will have a cross to carry. You that have it not, and contend only for doctrines, a name to live, rites, forms, and ceremonies of man's invention, and an outside

religion, will be loved by the world, and meet with neither outward nor inward opposition. But may we who desire to fear God, be willing to endure these things, "receiving the end of our faith, even the salvation of our souls."