

Contending for the Faith

Aim: To encourage us to hold fast to the one Truth, and not to be deceived by the presence of error.

Reading: Jude 3 “..... contend earnestly for the faith.....”¹

Introduction:

A few weeks ago, Lindy and I attended a wedding up on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. The ceremony was held in the church building of a well-known religious denomination. While waiting there for the bride to turn up late, I spent some time reading some articles in a religious newspaper² that this particular church provided for people to take.

There were articles in this publication talking about their on-going dialog with other religious groups and people of different faiths, and they referred to this relationship as “Christian Unity”.

From what I could see in these articles, they acknowledged that there were some fundamental differences in the beliefs and practices of the various groups involved in this dialog. But there was nothing to indicate that their dialog had the aim of correcting error so that they all came to a common knowledge of the Truth, as contained in God’s Word. The articles carried the idea that, while they disagreed with some of the fundamental teachings of these other groups, they would not try to get people to change their beliefs, nor expect others to get them to change theirs. In fact, the readers were being called on to “*grow and appreciate these other faiths, and to discover the richness of their (various religious) traditions*”.

The articles also contained the idea that there are many ways for people to come to God. By “*many ways*”, they were not talking about the different life-experiences that people have, but rather, they suggested that people can come to God and be acceptable to Him without necessarily being a follower of Jesus.

Now all of this seems to be very accommodating – nobody is asked to question what they believe, or to change what they believe. But is this in accordance with what the Bible teaches ?,

- i.e.*
- that there are different ways for sinners to come to God in order to be reconciled to Him, and,
 - that we can have “Christian fellowship” with people who have fundamentally different religious beliefs.

LESSON:

1) The Apostles preached / taught the one doctrine

When you look at **Matthew 28:19-20** and **Mark 16:15**, the scriptures tell us the following;

- Firstly, the gospel was to be preached to the whole world. In other words, it was to be taken to every country in every continent, from the primitive jungles of the Amazon, to the most sophisticated city there is.

¹ All quotes are from the New King James Version.

² “Journey” – Uniting Church in Australia, November 2009

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- Secondly, it was to be preached to all creatures – “*creatures*” meaning people. In other words, people of all races, all cultures, no matter what their heritage, were to be taught the gospel.
- And thirdly, those taught were to observe all that Jesus commanded through His apostles – not just parts of it, but all of it.

What Jesus taught needs to be preached to everyone because, a) “...*all have sinned...*” (**Romans 3:23**), and, b) the only way that people can be reconciled to God is through Jesus – **John 14:6, Acts 4:12**.

The things that Jesus taught came from the Father (**John 12:49-50**). Jesus commissioned the apostles to teach the world what He had taught them. These teachings are sometimes referred to in the scriptures as;

- “...*God and His doctrine...*” (**1 Timothy 6:1b**)
- “...*the doctrine of God our saviour...*” (**Titus 2:10**)
- “...*the doctrine of Christ.....*” (**2 John 9**)

It was also referred to as;

- “...*the apostles doctrine...*” (**Acts 2:42**)

Paul sometimes referred to what he taught as;

- “...*my gospel...*” (**Romans 2:16; 16:25**)
- “...*my ways in Christ...*” (**1 Corinthians 4:17**)
- “...*my doctrine...*” (**2 Timothy 3:10**).

But we should not interpret this to mean that what they taught was their own personal ideas about salvation and faithfulness. God sent the Holy Spirit to guide the apostles as to what to say (**John 14:26; 16:13; Galatians 1:11-12**). To suggest that they taught their own personal ideas would go against what is said in **2 Peter 1:20-21** (see also **1 Corinthians 9:16; 2 Corinthians 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 2:4a**). We can have confidence that what they spoke and wrote were the commands of God (**1 Corinthians 14:37**).

Another thing that we learn from the scriptures is that there is only one doctrine. In **Galatians 1:8-9** we are told that “*if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed* (emphasis mine – SK)”.

- strong words, but they are God’s words.

In other words, what the apostles taught, that’s it. No variations are allowed.

Now, if you have a look, you will see evidence of this “*one doctrine*” throughout the scriptures, both with regard to the process of how to become a christian, and also how to live a faithful, obedient life.

2) The “one doctrine” is shown in the examples of conversions.

In **Mark 16:16a**, Jesus said; “*He who believes and is baptised will be saved....*”. As we read the book of **Acts** and look at the examples of conversions, we see a common pattern emerge. While people were taught in different settings and in different locations, there was a consistency of the process and of the message;

- they were taught about Jesus and the need to believe in Him.

– **Acts 2:22-36; 3:12-26; 5:42; 8:5, 12, 35; 10:34-43;**

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16:14, 31-32; 17:22-31; 19:1-4

Note: The “entry point” for the teaching differed at times depending on what the hearer already knew about God³, but at the end of the day, it was the same message about Jesus that was taught.

- they were taught about the need to repent of their sins.
 - **Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30**
- they were taught of the need to be buried in the waters of baptism
 - **Acts 2:38; 8:12, 36; 10:48; 16:15, 33; 19:3-5; 22:16**

Note: From **Acts 19:3-5**, we can see that not just any baptism will do. It needs to be the right baptism (**Ephesians 4:5**), done in the right context, and with the recipient having the right understanding of what it is about.

The following chart shows the examples of people being converted throughout the book of **Acts**.

Scripture	Hear	Believe	Repent	Baptised
Acts 2:36-41, 42 Jews on Pentecost	✓ 37	implied	✓ 38	✓ 38, 41
Acts 8:5-13 People in Samaria	✓ 5	✓ 12-13		✓ 12-13
Acts 8:26-39 Ethiopian Eunuch	✓ 35	✓ 37		✓ 38
Acts 9:10-18 Acts 22:10-17 Saul / Paul	✓ 16			✓ 9:18 ✓ 22:16
Acts 10:24-48 Cornelius & friends	✓ 34-44			✓ 48
Acts 16:13-15 Lydia	✓ 13			✓ 15
Acts 16:25-34 Jailer	✓ 31-32	✓ 34		✓ 33
Acts 18:5-8 The Corinthians	✓ 8	✓ 8		✓ 8
Acts 19:1-5 The Ephesians	✓ 4-5			✓ 5

This is the only process shown in the New Testament from **Acts 2:38** onwards for people to follow in order to be reconciled to God.

³ For the Ethiopian Eunuch, Philip started with the book of Isaiah (**Acts 8:35**). With the Greeks at Athens, Paul started with their numerous idols to gods (**Acts 17:22 f.f.**)

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When people hear and believe the gospel, repent of their sins, and are baptised by immersion in water, **Romans 6:4** tells us that it is at that point when we “*walk in newness of life*”. Baptism is the point where our “old self” is buried. Baptism is the point where we are “*born again*”. **Galatians 3:27** tells us that it is those who have been baptised who have “*put on Christ*”. And when people are “*in Christ*” (through baptism), they are “*new creatures in Christ*” (**2 Corinthians 5:17**) and have access to “*...every spiritual blessing (that is found) in Christ...*” (**Ephesians 1:3**).

3) The “*one doctrine*” is shown in the common teaching to the churches

In **1 Corinthians 4:17**, Paul indicates that he taught the same thing “*every where, in every church*”.⁴ What Paul is saying here is that he taught the same thing in every church that he came to. Given that there is only one gospel (or doctrine), this should not surprise us.

When we look at the New Testament letters, we can see evidence of this common teaching across the churches. For example;

- What Paul taught the Corinthians about the need to be sensitive to the conscience of others (**1 Corinthians 8:1-13**), he also taught the Romans (**Romans 14:1-23**) – different countries, but same message.
- The church at Troas met to have the Lord’s Supper (**Acts 20:7** “*...break bread...*”), and so did the church at Corinth (**1 Corinthians 11:17-34**).⁵
- The same principles that Paul taught the Ephesians and Colossians about the roles of servants and masters (**Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1**), Peter and James also taught in their epistles (**1 Peter 2:18; James 5:1-4**).
- What Paul taught the Ephesians about the need to forgive others as Christ forgave them (**Ephesians 4:32**), he also taught the Colossians (**Colossians 3:13**).
- What Paul taught the Romans about walking (*i.e.* living) properly and not engaging in drunkenness, *etc* (**Romans 13:13**), the apostle Peter also taught to his readers in **1 Peter 4:2-3**.
- The need to be ready and willing to share with others was taught to the Corinthians and Galatians (**1 Corinthians 16:1-3**), and Timothy was to teach the same thing at Ephesus (**1 Timothy 1:3; 6:18**).

Note: The recipients of our gifts will vary from time to time, and from place to place,

⁴ For comments about “*my ways in Christ*” quoted in this verse, see page 2.

⁵ Sometimes people may ask, “*Well why don’t you have the Lord’s Supper in an upper room like Jesus did?*” The response to that is that there is nothing in the New Testament that teaches that the venue for church meetings is important. In fact, when Jesus spoke to the woman at the well (**John 4:1-24**), He seemed to down-play the significance of the location for worship (vs.**20-21**). What He said is important is that people “*must worship in spirit and truth*” (vs.**24**).

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e.g. at one point in time, the Corinthians and Galatians shared with those at Jerusalem (**1 Cor. 16:1-3**), the Philippians shared with Paul (**Phil. 4:15-18**), but the need for generosity was a common teaching.
- there will always be someone in need (**Matthew 26:11a**)

- In the letter that Paul sent to the Colossians, he told them to pass it on to the church at Laodicea, and that they should read the letter that he sent to the Laodiceans (**Colossians 4:16**). In other words, what he taught one church via his letters, the other church was to receive also.
- Passages such as **1 Corinthians 7:17; 11:16; 14:33** also show that there were common customs and teachings across all of the churches.

Point: Because there is only one doctrine, it is only natural that we would expect to see a common teaching across the churches. Therefore, we only need to see what was taught to one church to know what was taught to the other churches.

- *e.g.* we don't have a record of what was taught to the church at Troas about how they needed to be ready and willing to forgive others. But does anyone seriously think that what they were taught on the subject was any different from what was taught to the Ephesians or Colossians? Of course not.

4) The basis of true unity

In the article mentioned in the introduction of this lesson, there was talk about religious unity. But the only basis or criteria that they seemed to use to establish unity was that people believed in God. Well, if that is the only criteria for unity, then technically speaking, we could have unity with demons, because even they acknowledge God (**James 2:19**). But the fact that the idea of fellowshiping with demons is such a ridiculous notion demonstrates to us that there is more to it than simply an acknowledgement of, or a belief in, God.

Have a look at **1 John 1:7**, "...if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another...."

The word "*if*" shows that true Christian fellowship is conditional. And the condition is this, that we are "*walking in the light*". But what does "*walking in the light*" mean?

Firstly, let us see who is "*in the light*". In **1 Thessalonians**, Paul is writing to the church at Thessalonica. In chapter **5:5** he says, "*you are all sons of light*"

- so who are the sons of light? Those who are in the church (from **1:1**).
- and who is in the church? Those who are saved (**Acts 2:47**).
- and who are those who are saved? Those who have obeyed the gospel (from the context of **Acts 2:47**).

In **1 Peter 2:9**, Peter tells us the same thing. Peter is writing to the "*elect*", the "*sanctified*" (**1:2**) – those who have been saved (*e.g.* **1 Corinthians 6:11**).

Secondly, in **Ephesians 5:8-11**, Paul says that the Christians ("*saints*" vs. **1:1**) at Ephesus are "*light in the Lord*" (vs. **8a**), which is in keeping with what I said just above. But notice something else in this verse. There is a responsibility

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placed on those who are in the light. They are to “*walk as children of light*” (vs.8b). Being “*in the light*” requires a certain manner of living. Paul goes on to say what “*walking as children of light*” involves;

- *finding out what is acceptable to the Lord*, (vs.10)
i.e. “*what is it that God wants me to do?*”
- and that involves doing what God wants (**Colossians 1:10**),
- *staying away from darkness*. (vs.11)
- i.e. staying away from unrighteousness, which would include religious error (**Galatians 1:8-9**)

So from these passages we can conclude that “*walking in the light as He is in the light*” refers to;

- those who have obeyed the truth in order to be saved, and,
- those who continue to do those things that are pleasing to the Father
. – e.g. **John 8:29; 1 John 5:2-3**

Point: True unity is not based on whether everybody meets together in the same building. The Corinthian church shows us that you can all meet together but still not have unity (**1 Corinthians 1:10-13**).

True christian unity exists when people obey the gospel as laid in His Word, and continue to walk faithfully and obediently in His Truth.

Note: Let me just say this in relation to those who are in religious error. This lesson is not meant to be a slur on their sincerity, *etc.* We need to teach them the truth in a loving manner (**Ephesians 4:15**) so that they can be saved, just like we need to teach anybody else. But spending time with those who have not yet fully obeyed the gospel, in order to teach them the truth, is not the same thing as having christian fellowship with those who are already saved.

Application

From the reading, Jude exhorted his readers to “*contend earnestly for the faith*”. There is truth, and there is error (**1 John 4:6**). As the church, we are to be “*the pillar and ground of truth*” (**1 Timothy 3:16**). There will be times when we will have to take a stand against religious error (**2 Timothy 2:24-25**).

Earlier, we read from **Galatians 1:6-9**, and we can see that God is jealous of His Word. He doesn’t want it changed or corrupted – see also **Deuteronomy 4:2; Revelation 22:18-19**. If people teach a gospel (or doctrine) different to what is in the Bible, then God says “*...let him (or her) be accursed...*”. That is a pretty strong condemnation from God.

Now when we read this passage, we understand that it was written in the context of where some Jews in the first Century were saying that Christians needed to be circumcised in order to be saved (**Acts 15:1, 24**). By adding this extra requirement, they were teaching a “*different gospel*”.

Now we probably won’t run into anybody today that says that you need to be circumcised in order to be saved, but what about people who teach and say things like;

- *Sprinkling or pouring of water are acceptable forms of baptism.*
- “*You don’t need to be immersed in water in order to be saved.*”

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- “*Just believe in Jesus, and you will be saved.*”
- “*Just call on Jesus to come into your heart, and you will become a Christian right there and then.*”

When people teach these things, they are teaching a plan of salvation that is different to what the Bible teaches – they are teaching a “*different gospel*”. From the principle taught in the Galatians passage, people who teach such things are also “... *accursed...*”.

Now we might think that that is a bit harsh or unfair, and try to excuse them by saying things like;

- “*But they are so sincere.*” – read **Matthew 7:21-23**, and ask yourself, “*is sincerity an acceptable substitute for following the truth?*”
- “*But they are such good people.*” Cornelius was what we might call a “good” man, but he needed to obey the gospel (just like us) in order to be saved (**Acts 10:1-48**)
- “*But they have such a zeal and enthusiasm for God.*” – read **Romans 10:1-2**. The implication from verse **1** is that the Israelites that Paul was referring to were not saved, in spite of their zeal for God.
- “*But they have been able to teach me some good things.*” That may well be so. However, I know of some atheists who have taught me some good things, but that doesn’t automatically make them right with God.

One thing that we do not find in scriptures is the concept that God is happy for us to agree to disagree about what the Bible teaches. When we look at the account of Apollos in **Acts 18:24-26**, and the Ephesians in **Acts 19:1-5**, we see that error was corrected as soon as it became apparent. There was no agreement to say, “*Well if that’s what you want to believe, then so be it.*” When the Ephesians saw that they needed to have the correct baptism, there was no hesitation – they went ahead and obeyed.

Any given congregation may contain members with different levels of maturity and understanding (e.g. **1 Corinthians 11:18-19**; **Revelation 3:4**). But, with teaching and time, our collective beliefs and understandings of what the Bible teaches should be converging towards the one truth (**Ephesians 4:11-14**), not diverging in different directions (**1 Corinthians 1:10**⁶).

The idea that we, along with all the different religious groups with their different faiths and doctrines, are “*all heading in the same direction, just getting there in different ways*”, and that “*we are all in fellowship with each other*” is not in accord with what the scriptures teach – **Matthew 7:13-14**.

⁶ We also need to remember that it is possible for people to be of the same mind, same judgment, etc, but not be following the Truth – **2 Thessalonians 2:10-12**.

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ANNEX - Explaining the differences between the letters

Some may ask, “*If the churches were all taught the same things, then why do we see different things mentioned in the different letters?*”.

Firstly, we need to remember that these letters were written to existing churches and Christians. They were not written as initial instructions on how to set up a congregation, *etc*, because the congregations already existed. We can see in passages such as **Acts 18:1, 11** and **Acts 19:1, 10** that the churches at Corinth and Ephesus had received lengthy teaching from Paul prior to the letters being written to them⁷. The letters, therefore, were written as “follow up” teachings.

Secondly, while some of the content of these letters contained common teachings across other churches, the letters were also used to address specific issues that related directly to a particular congregation. For example, we read in **1 Corinthians 5:1-7** about a man who “*has his father’s wife*”, and the church at Corinth had done nothing about it. So Paul tells them what they needed to do.

But we don’t find this specific teaching repeated in other letters, probably because this particular scenario that existed at Corinth didn’t exist in other congregations. But if this same scenario did exist in another church, such as Ephesus, or even here in our own congregation, then we can be confident that what Paul would tell the Ephesians, or would tell us, would be exactly the same thing that he told the Corinthians.

Point: When we see different things mentioned in different letters, we are not seeing different doctrines – “*God is not the author of confusion*” (**1 Corinthians 14:33**). What we are seeing in the letters are different parts of the one overall doctrine.

The result is that, when we look at all of the New Testaments books as a whole, rather than limit ourselves to just one or two books, we then get the complete picture of the doctrine of Christ, *i.e.* the whole counsel of God (**Acts 20:27**) - see also **2 Timothy 3:16-17**; **2 Peter 1:2-3**.

⁷ In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, we can see that he had previously taught them about the Lord’s Supper - **1 Corinthians 11:23** “...*that which I also delivered to you...*”