

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, July 12, 2015**

CONTENDING FOR THE FAITH

Jude 1-16

In 2004 Christian opinion researcher George Barna found that among Protestant clergy only 51% held to what he termed “a biblical worldview.” Now he defined such a worldview as believing that absolute moral truth exists, that it is based upon the Bible and having a biblical view on six core beliefs. Those beliefs were the accuracy of biblical teaching, the sinless nature of Jesus, the existence of Satan, the omnipotence and omniscience of God, salvation by grace alone, and the personal responsibility to evangelize. In other words probably nothing that anyone here would disagree with. Only 28% of mainline pastors affirmed these beliefs. Only 71% of Southern Baptist pastors did. Less than two weeks ago the Episcopal Church officially changed its denominational law to allow clergy to perform same-sex weddings. The Presbyterian Church USA did so earlier this year. And lest you think this is only a mainline problem, a group of dozens of evangelical leaders, including one of the former high-level employees of the National Association of Evangelicals and an EPC pastor, wrote this: “Today, the Supreme Court of the United States has ruled in favor of civil marriage equality for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and queer Americans. We join with millions of people around the country in celebration of this major step toward justice and equality for LGBTQ people in the United States. While we believe that the Supreme Court’s decision is a major step in the right direction, we are also reminded that this victory is only one step toward true equality for LGBTQ individuals and highlights our need as people of faith to continue to work for justice. In many places across our country discrimination against LGBTQ people continues to be protected by law.”

One of the best-selling Christian books of 2012 was entitled *Love Wins*. It was by the prominent pastor of one of America’s biggest evangelical churches. In it he argued that there is no hell and that all people will be saved regardless of faith. Last weekend one of America’s largest Southern Baptist churches with campuses in Texas, Florida and the United Kingdom welcomed to its pulpit one of the country’s best-known Mormons who proclaimed from the pulpit, “We are a covenant nation. We are the only ones besides the original state of Israel that made the covenant with God.” Folks, I’m as patriotic as any American but equating our country with Old Testament Israel is LDS doctrine, not Christian teaching. We live in perilous times. Times when the gospel is under assault both from popular and elite culture and even from within the church. These are times when, as Jude puts it, “we are called to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints.” Not, mind you, from a position of self-righteousness because we along with all those who attack and undermine the gospel are sinners in the sight of God, in desperate need of His grace, of His forgiveness and of His mercy. Rather, we do so only from the standpoint of being redeemed children of His who have been given a mission and that mission is to proclaim the gospel and to do so in all its truthfulness.

We're going to take a look in the next couple of weeks at Jude and so I would like to begin with the "To..From." This is an epistle and it was written by a person of consequence. Jude is not just a name, nor was he a friend of Paul McCartney's. (I couldn't help it, I'm sorry.) Rather Jude is the brother of the apostle James, which means he was the half-brother of Jesus. This is one of the few individuals in all of human history who can say that they were related, even if only partially, by blood to the very Son of God. This is not just Joe Blow off the street. This is a person of consequence. And he's writing to a group of unknown recipients. We don't know anything about them. There's no salutation that indicates where they are or who they are. They are, however, undoubtedly Christians. He says, "To those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ." Those who have been called are those who have been chosen. We, as Presbyterians, would say they have been elect, and in fact that's what the term means. They have been chosen by God for salvation, for eternal life, for citizenship in His kingdom. And they're loved by God the Father, which is to say that they have been chosen not because they're wonderful individuals who happen to know all the answers, but because God sovereignly chose to love them. God chose to love them. And they are kept by Jesus Christ, which is to say that their salvation is assured by His power and in consequence of His promise.

So that's who it's from – the half-brother of the Lord. And that's who it's to – people chosen, loved, kept, which is to say, people just like us. Now this letter is about a crisis in the church. It's a crises much like the one that we face today. We don't know whether he's speaking in generalized terms about all of the churches or whether he's talking particularly about one local church. But regardless, it's a word about a crisis that in our day affects us all. His original intention, as we see in verse 3, was to write about the salvation that we share. He wanted to write a positive letter extolling and explaining the gospel along the lines of what Paul did in Romans. Paul did address some errors in Romans, but for the most part what we see there is simply a positive exposition, "This is what the gospel is." And he leaves dealing with errors with epistles like Galatians and 1 Corinthians. That's what Jude wanted to do. But he has to take a different approach. The situation is so dire that instead he writes and urges them to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. Now when he uses that term "the faith" it's important, it's essential that we understand what he's talking about. He is not referring to the relationship of faith, of trust, that characterizes our bond with God in Jesus Christ. It's not that personal relationship that is supposed to characterize, and does characterize every Christian that he's talking about. That's not the faith to which he refers. The faith to which he refers is the body of truth that has been revealed to the church by the Holy Spirit. That body of truth includes the stories of Jesus that form the gospels, it includes Paul and Peter and John's explanation of the meaning and the purpose and the plan revealed in Jesus' ministry and the life of the church. It includes both theological and moral teaching. I'm sure you're aware that pretty much all of Paul's letters have two halves to them. One half is his exposition of the gospel, or his facing of the errors about the gospel that he encounters. The other half has to do with the moral teaching that stems from that and that is built on that foundation.

Another way to put this is in terms of what has been at times called the “Vincentian Canon,” named after St. Vincent of Lerins, a fifth-century bishop. He wrote this: “Now in the catholic church itself [by catholic he means the church extant throughout the world, which would include us, even if we’re Presbyterians] we take the greatest care to hold that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.” Everywhere, regardless of where in the world the church is. Always, from the beginning. And by all, which is to say by all true Christians. That’s what he means when he speaks of “the faith.” The faith for which they are to contend is what the church has always believe and taught and practiced and which for us is embodied in Scripture. That’s not to say that the tradition of the church or its theological history is not important. But above all, what we’re talking about is what is embodied in Scripture. And his exhortation is that they contend for the truth. The word that’s translated “contend” there refers to the intense effort that one puts out in a wrestling match. But this is a wrestling match that isn’t for a gold medal or a trophy. This is a wrestling match that is a life and death struggle between truth and falsehood, between the way of salvation and the way of damnation. He is making very clear here that the faith for which we are to contend is something that we are to fight with every fiber of our being to uphold, even as we seek to spread it. And we uphold it in the face, sad to say, of those who oppose it. And just as in Jude’s day there were those even within the church who were in opposition to the gospel, so too, today, are there those within the church, broadly defined, who stand in opposition to the gospel and who do everything they can, often successfully, to drag the church, even if only kicking and screaming, from the foundation of truth that has been laid in Scripture. The crisis, he says, is caused by wolves in sheep’s clothing. He doesn’t use that expression, of course, but that’s essentially what he means. Wolves in sheep’s clothing who have distorted or denied both the theological and the moral message of the faith.

He goes on to describe the folks that he’s talking about. He doesn’t name them. And it’s important, I think. I have not at any point in this sermon named individuals, though some of you may know at least a couple of the people that I was talking about. And I don’t propose to render judgment on their eternal faith. This has nothing to do with saying who is saved and who is not saved. Most importantly, who is not saved. I’m not going to say, for instance, that the author of *Love Wins* is not saved. That’s not my place. That’s not any of our places. That’s for God to decide. That is not the same thing as saying that what is taught that is false must be opposed. And that’s what Jude does here. The men in question, to whom he is referring, have, he said, already been condemned. Verse 4: “For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago.” It’s been known what these men were about. He may, in fact, be referring to Old Testament prophecies or the prophecies in other non-Old Testament books, apocryphal books, that referred to them and referred to what they were going to do in order to try to oppose the kingdom of God. And they’ve been condemned for past failures and errors. They are referred to in verse 4 as “godless.” These are men who are, for lack of a better term, notorious sinners. We’re all sinners, right? We can all affirm that. But these are men who stand before others, even stand in the pulpits of churches, and proclaim error, heresy, apostasy, immorality and do so proudly. They’re very happy to have you know what they stand for. Jude says they “change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and they deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.” Two specific errors with which they’re charged –

one theological, one moral. They deny Jesus Christ our Sovereign and Lord and that is mirrored in our own day in those who would claim that everyone will be saved or in those who say there are multiple routes, multiple ways of salvation. There are fifty different roads that go up the mountain but at the top of the mountain we all wind up in the same place. That's a way of denying Jesus Christ our *only* Sovereign and Lord. He also says that they have turned the grace of God into a license for immorality and that, of course, is mirrored today by those who claim that grace is sufficient to ignore the moral law and even to overthrow it. Even to overthrow it or to totally transform it into the opposite of what it was originally given as.

Now he says in verses 5-16, having described the problem, that those who deny or distort the gospel will be judged. He gives examples in verses 5-7 of those who were delivered out of Egypt, among the Israelites who later wound up worshipping the golden calf. You all know what happened to them. He refers to angels, who fell from heaven through their rebellion against God's authority and so forfeited their own. He refers to Sodom and Gomorrah, towns that gave themselves up to sexual immorality. Each of these, he says in verse 7, "serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire." Doesn't sound very much like there's no hell to me.

Those, he says, who have so infiltrated the church are guilty of the same things. "In the very same way," he says, like the Israelites engaged in idolatry, worshipping the golden calf, like the angels engaged in rebellion against God's authority, like Sodom and Gomorrah, giving themselves up to their own lusts contrary to God's will, "these dreamers pollute their own bodies, they reject authority and they slander celestial beings. But even the archangel Michael," he says, "when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, 'the Lord rebuke you.'" This story is not anywhere in the Old Testament. This story came from one of the apocryphal books. If you think that somehow invalidates what Jude is saying, keep in mind that Paul quotes pagan Greek authors in his writings. So it's not as though biblical writers are unwilling to use non-biblical sources. He uses one of the apocryphal Jewish books to refer to a dispute between Michael and the body of Moses. I don't know about you, but I would've liked to have been there for that. I would like to have seen that. The interesting thing, he says, is that Michael doesn't slander the father of lies. Instead he says, "The Lord rebuke you." An important point to each of us not to personalize the struggle that we're dealing with. When I stand in opposition to those who I believe distort or deny the gospel, I do not get to point fingers at them. I can take issue with what they write or with what they say. I can take issue with their actions. I am in no position to point at them anymore than Michael the archangel was in a position to point at Satan, because Michael was a being under the authority of God who undertook this dispute, in whatever form it was, on God's behalf. And so it was the Lord who rebuked him. "And yet," he says in verse 10, "these men speak abusively against whatever they don't understand." And sad to say, one of the things that has soiled the Christian church for the last twenty-five or thirty years, people on both sides of the argument over sexuality making it personal, pointing fingers, saying, "So-and-so is evil." Not "so-and-so is wrong." There's nothing wrong with saying so-and-so is wrong. But so-and-so is evil, so-and-so is not a Christian, so-and-so has no place in the church. Their

teaching may not, does not. The person, well, the person is another story. The person's a sinner. What better place for them to be than the church? Sad to say, all too many folks, and I will confess that at times I have fallen into this, sound just like the men he's describing here in verse 10. And of those men, he says in verse 11, "Woe to them."

He proceeds to give three more examples that we won't take any more time with, having to do with Cain, Balaam and Korah. You can look up those names if you aren't familiar with the types of sin that they engaged in. The crucial thing in verse 11 is, "Woe to them." To those who follow in the footsteps of Cain or Balaam or Korah. "These men," he says, "are blemishes at your love feasts." And then he proceeds to describe what they do. They're self-centered, he says, they're greedy, they're unfruitful, they bring to shore nothing helpful, only shame. They're useless and untrustworthy guides destined for eternal rejection. That's God's judgment, not Jude's. It's not ours. But they will have to reckon with God.

He concludes, with verses 14-17, his disposition of these men with prophecy from Enoch, one of the close descendants of Adam. Here again he goes to an extra-biblical source. He quotes the apocryphal book of Enoch and it's a prophecy that God will come to judge all people. All people, not just the ones he's been talking about. He will judge all of us. We will all stand before Him. But those who have rejected Him will be judged and found wanting.

He concludes with yet another summary of who these men are. Let's summarize it this way: He's talking about those within the church who are seeking to undermine it. They may not even be aware of their own motivations. They may think they have the purest of intentions, but what they are doing is undermining God's people and God's mission. They will not triumph, but that does not mean that they can be ignored. It certainly does not mean that their message can be treated as inconsequential. We all know, many of you quite personally from your experience in some of our mainline churches, that the gospel has been brought into disrepute, not only in our own country but around the world, by those who have sought to transform its message and turn it into the opposite of what it actually is.

When Jude calls upon us to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints, he is issuing us a clarion call to no longer ignore that, to no longer treat it as inconsequential, and most of all, perhaps, to no longer turn our backs and say, "It's none of my business." The integrity of the gospel and the message that we have for those in the church and for the world is all our business. And next week as we take a look at the second half of Jude we will see how that should play itself out in each of our lives.