

CONTENDING FOR THE FAITH

Selected Scriptures ~ Dennis McBride

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“Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you *contend earnestly for the faith* which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3 – emphasis added).

INTRODUCTION

A subtle and erroneous teaching is having an enormous impact on evangelicalism today. High profile pastors and teachers are proclaiming it via television and other media, and Christians by the millions are embracing it. Those who embrace it are considered loving, accepting, evangelical, and Christ-minded. Those who oppose it are branded narrow-minded, dogmatic, legalistic, and divisive.

It is a subtle teaching because it upholds the gospel message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and what Christian would argue with that? However, it is also an erroneous teaching because it attempts to divorce the gospel from the rest of biblical teaching, claiming that the gospel is the only doctrine that should matter in evangelism and church unity. All other doctrines are secondary and (to some) irrelevant to the mission of the Church.

The following tirade by Paul Crouch, owner of the Trinity Broadcasting Network, which is the world’s largest Christian television network, illustrates the passion and reckless abandon with which some have embraced this teaching.

. . . That old rotten Sanhedrin crowd, twice dead, plucked up by the roots . . . they’re damned and on their way to hell and I don’t think there’s any redemption for them . . . the hypocrites, the heresy hunters that want to find a little mote of illegal doctrine in some Christian’s eyes . . . when they’ve got a whole forest in their own lives . . .

I say, “To hell with you! Get out of my life! Get out of the way! Quit blockin’ God’s bridges! I’m tired of this! . . . This is in my spirit. Oh, hallelujah!” . . .

Have you ever seen the old movie, Patton? He’s my hero; he’s my hero. Old nail-chewin’, tobacco-chewin’, cussin’ Patton – but he read the Bible every day. I have a feelin’ we’ll see old General George in heaven . . .

There’s a wonderful scene in Patton . . . they’re tryin’ to get the Third Army across the bridge in France and there’s an old, dumb jackass – a donkey – right there on the bridge and it’s blockin’ the whole convoy of troops . . . General George roars up, pulls that ivory-handled revolver out . . . and he shoots the donkey . . .

There's a spiritual application here . . . I want to say to all you Scribes, Pharisees, heresy-hunters, all of you that are going around pickin' little bits of doctrinal error out of everybody's eyes and dividin' the Body of Christ . . . get out of God's way, stop blockin' God's bridges, or God's goin' to shoot you if I don't . . . let Him sort out all this doctrinal doodoo!

I don't care about your doctrines as long as you name the name of Jesus, as long as you believe He died dead [sic] and was buried but came out of the tomb on Sunday morning and ascended to the Father . . . I don't care about anything else! Let's join hands . . . to get this gospel preached in all the world . . .

The rest of this stuff is what Paul the Apostle calls dung – human excrement! It's not worth anything! Get rid of it . . . and get on with winning the lost . . .

I refuse to argue any longer with any of you out there! Don't even call me if you want to argue doctrine, if you want to straighten somebody out . . . criticize Ken Copeland . . . or Dad Hagin. Get out of my life! I don't want to even talk to you or hear you! I don't want to see your ugly face! Get out of my face in Jesus' name! (“Praise the Lord” broadcast on the Trinity Broadcasting Network [April 2 1991].)

Thankfully, few who agree with Paul Crouch's doctrine would express it as strongly or as crudely as he did. But the fact remains that many are embracing it despite Our Lord's call to go into the world and teach *all* that He commanded (Matt. 28:20). ALL Scripture “is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16), and Christians (especially church leaders) are to study to show themselves approved to God as workmen who do not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the world of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). How then can anyone maintain that the gospel (as important as it is) is the only thing that matters and that all other doctrines are dung!

When Paul made that statement in Philippians 3:8, he was referring to Jewish legalism that sought to add works to faith as a condition for salvation. He never denounced orthodox Christian doctrine as dung. In fact, it was through Paul that the Holy Spirit gave us a majority of the New Testament doctrines we love and are called to study, teach, guard, and adorn.

Those who forsake the whole counsel of God (even in the name of the gospel), violate Scripture; deny the priority of sound doctrine in the church; undermine biblical discernment; stifle Christian growth; and open the door to a potential flood of erroneous, novel, or blatantly demonic doctrines to infiltrate the church.

In actuality, even though Paul Crouch said he doesn't care about anything other than the gospel, TBN and many other organizations that hold to the “gospel only” teaching aggressively propagate their own denomination's doctrinal perspectives. Therefore, the

application of their “gospel only” position is selective at best. In fact, it was criticism of some of the novel doctrinal perspectives he promoted on his program that prompted Paul Crouch’s outburst cited above. That reveals another characteristic of this movement: using evangelism as an excuse for not dealing with weak or erroneous doctrine.

Another example comes from the high profile Pentecostal evangelist Benny Hinn, who on the Trinity Broadcasting Network’s November 8, 1990, “Praise–a–thon”, had this to say to those who called some of his teaching into question (teaching which, incidentally, needed to be confronted):

“Somebody’s attacking me because of something I’m teaching. Let me tell you something, brother: You watch it! . . . You know, I’ve looked for one verse in the Bible; I just can’t seem to find it. One verse that said ‘If you don’t like them, kill them.’ I really wish I could fine it! . . . You stink, frankly - that’s the way I think about it! . . . Sometimes I wish God will give me a Holy Ghost machine gun; I’ll blow your head off!”

Perhaps in hindsight Paul Crouch and Benny Hinn didn’t choose their words as carefully as they may wish they had, but their positions help to illustrate an increasing arrogance on the part of some ministers, and a concerning departure from biblical accountability. Also, they underscore the need for believers to be grounded in God’s Word, discerning in what they accept as biblical teaching, and relentless in contending for the faith against blatant attacks or subtle compromises.

Toward those goals, this study presents the value of our Christian faith (referred to simply as “the faith” in many New Testament passages), the definition of the faith, and how to defend the faith.

I. THE VALUE OF THE FAITH

Scripture gives clear indication of what is important to God with respect to guarding the faith. Here are some representative verses:

- A. *Acts 20:28–32*** – Paul admonished the Ephesian elders, saying, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own [precious] blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

- B. 1 Tim. 6:20** - “O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called ‘knowledge’ - which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith. Grace be with you.”
- C. 2 Tim. 1:14** - “Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.”
- D. 1 Cor. 16:13** - “Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.”
- E. Phil. 1:27** - “Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.”
- F. Col. 1:23** - “Continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard.”
- G. 1 Tim. 3:8–9** - “Deacons must . . . hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.”
- H. Titus 1:13** - “Reprove [false teachers] severely that they may be sound in the faith.”
- I. Jude 3** - “Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”

II. THE DEFINITION OF THE FAITH

A. What is “the faith?”

It is objective revelation, not subjective belief.

B. Illustrations:

1. **Gal. 1:23** - [Speaking of Paul] - “He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy.” (The content of Paul’s preaching.)
2. **Gal. 3:23** - “Before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. (Revealed truth)
3. **Phil. 1:27** - “Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.” (The gospel)
4. **1 Tim. 4:1** - “The Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons.” (Content of sound doctrine).
5. **1 Tim. 4:6** - “In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following.” (The words Paul taught Timothy)

C. “The Faith” is God’s revealed truth - the content of Christian doctrine.

D. Another term Scripture uses for Christian faith is “the truth.”

We have a God–given responsibility to the truth.

We are to:

1. **Hear it** - Eph. 1:13 - “In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation - having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise.”
2. **Believe it** - 2 Thess. 2:12 - “In order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.”

3. **Know it** - 1 Tim. 2:4 - "God, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." John 8:31-32 - "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free."
4. **Receive and love it** (synonyms for salvation) – 2 Thess. 2:10 - The antichrist will deceive "those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved."
5. **Obey it** - Gal. 5:7 - "You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?"
6. **Be established in it** - 2 Pet. 1:12 - "I shall always be ready to remind you of these things, even though you (already) know them, and have been established in the truth which is present with you."
7. **Practice it** - 1 John 1:6 - "If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth." Also John 3:20-21.
8. **Walk in it** - 3 John 1:4 - "I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth."

E. As a Christian, you are characterized as one in whom truth dwells

2 John 1:2 - "the truth . . . abides in us and will be with us forever."

F. Collectively, the church is the pillar and support of the truth.

1. *1 Tim. 3:14-15* - Paul told Timothy, "I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth."
2. Commentator William Barclay, (*1 Timothy*, pp. 88-89) says,

"The church is the pillar of the truth. In Ephesus, to which this letter was written, the world pillar would have a special significance. The greatest glory of Ephesus was the Temple of Diana or Artemis. 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians' (Acts 19:28). It was one of the seven wonders of the world. One of its features was its pillars. It contained one hundred and twenty-seven pillars, every one of them the gift of a king.

“All were made of marble, and some were studded with jewels and overlaid with gold. The people of Ephesus knew well how beautiful a thing a pillar could be. It may well be that the idea of the word pillar here is . . . display. Often the statue of a famous man is set on the top of a pillar that it may stand out above all ordinary things and so be clearly seen, even from a distance. The idea here is that the Church’s duty is to hold up the truth in such a way that all men may see it.

“The Church is [also] the [support or foundation] of the truth . . . [and] keeps it standing intact. In a world which does not wish to face the truth, the Church holds it up for all to see. In a world which would often gladly eliminate unwelcome truth, the Church supports it against all who would seek to destroy it.”

3. The church supports the truth by:

(From William Hendriksen, *Timothy*, pp. 136–37)

- Hearing and heeding it (Matt. 13:9)
- Handling it rightly (2 Tim. 2:15)
- Hiding it in the heart (Ps. 119:11)
- Holding it forth as the Word of Life (Phil. 2:16)
- Digesting it (Rev. 10:9). (study and meditation)
- Defending it (Phil. 1:16)
- Disseminating it (Matt. 28:18–20)
- Demonstrating its power in consecrated living (Col. 3:12–17)

III. THE DEFENSE OF THE FAITH

A. What are we to do with it?

1. Grow in it

- a. By feeding on it

1 Tim. 4:6 - “In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following.”

- b. By being equipped for ministry

Eph. 4:11–13 - Jesus gave gifted leaders to the church “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the

faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ.”

c. Primary tool of equipping?

2 Tim. 3:16–17 - “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

2. Hold to it

1 Tim. 3:8–9 - “Deacons must . . . hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

3. Stand firm in it

1 Cor. 16:13 - “Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.”

Col. 1:23 - “Continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard.”

4. Strive for it

Phil. 1:27 - “Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.”

Define “strive”: “To content or struggle along with someone (*Rienecker/Rogers*, p 548). Like Christian gladiators against a common foe (Hendriksen).

5. Contend for it

a. **Jude 3–4** - “Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.

“For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly

persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.”

- b. **“Contend”** is the central exhortation in this epistle.

The Greek verb translated “contend” is *Epagonizomai*. Its root word is *agonizo*, from which we get our English “agony” or “to agonize.” The Greek word was used of athletic contests and the struggle and effort of the athletes in their games. The concept it conveys in Jude 3 is to agonize on behalf of the faith; to enter into intense, energetic competition for the defense of the faith.

- c. Contending is necessary because false teachers infiltrate the church, trade on grace, deny Christ, and teach false doctrine out of sinful motives.

- d. Elders are to refute false teachers.

Titus 1:9–13 - “Holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach, for the sake of sordid gain. One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.’ This testimony is true. For this cause reprove them severely that they may be sound in the faith.”

B. How do we defend it?

1. Warn about error

1 Tim. 4:6 – After warning Timothy that some people in the Ephesian church would fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, Paul said, “In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of sound doctrine.”

2. Confront error

Titus 1:10–11 - “There are many rebellious men . . . who must be silenced.”

Titus 3:10–11 - “Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being selfcondemned.”

3. Maintain a proper attitude

2 Tim. 2:24–25 - “The Lord’s bondservant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.”

CONCLUSION

When Scripture speaks of “the faith”, it is referring to more than simply the gospel message (as important as that message is). It is referring to the full content of Christian doctrine as revealed in God’s Word. Paul stated it this way to the Ephesian Elders:

“I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house. . . . I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (*Acts 20:20, 26–27*).

We close with Peter’s warning:

2 Pet. 2:1–3 - “False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.”

The Christian faith is a precious treasure that has been entrusted the church collectively, and to believers individually. Guarding the faith is a sacred responsibility, for there are those who would deny, distort, and even destroy it if they could. And many attempt to do so in the name of Christianity.

“Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3 – emphasis added).