

Be on Guard for Yourselves and For all the Flock The Danger of Heresies 1-Introduction

January 3, 2021

The Acts 20:17-38

17 From Miletus he [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.

18 And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time,

19 serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews;

20 how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house,

21 solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

22 And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there,

23 except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.

24 But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

25 "And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face.

26 Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men.

27 For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

28 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 blood.

29 I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;

30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.

31 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.

32 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.

33 I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes.

34 You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me.

35 In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

36 When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.

37 And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him,

38 grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship.

To the Glory of God

Now God has moved powerfully in this Church to give us a biblical form of Government that consists of a *plurality* of highly trained and morally qualified men, who make up the Board of Elders. And, periodically, I want to remind all of us *what* it is that this Board does- and *why* we are doing it- so that we won't lose sight of the Prize.

Several years ago, God made me a pariah with many here on the Mississippi Coast because I broke away from the "status quo" of "going along to get along". God very strongly, impressed on me the importance of being a "fool for Christ" by striving to have a "Biblical Church". And, over the years, I have tried to convey to you how vital this effort is and what we are doing- *specifically*- to make sure that we, in fact, ARE a Church that has the Characteristics that are described in the Bible.

And that is *why* the Goal of the Elders for the Covenant of Peace Church is:

- ✓ To maintain a pure Doctrine
- ✓ To seek for Orthodoxy
- ✓ To desire to be Biblical
- ✓ To get the Gospel right
- ✓ To be ever- reforming (Latin: *Semper Reformanda*)

... which are all synonyms for the same thing. And we have established this to be our primary Goal because we have become convinced by Scripture that by striving

for these things- we will be pleasing to the Lord and will give Him the Honor that is due to Him.

But, there is one other aspect that the Elders are to do- that is very important and vital. In addition to doing all of these other things- Elders are supposed to do what the Apostle Paul said in this Passage:

... I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly ... solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ... I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God... I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God... 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 blood.

... so, this is how Elders are supposed to act- not failing to faithfully preach and teach the Gospel and to live a life that is both transparent and godly.

But then Paul told them why he was talking this way:

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...

... and these words ring in my ears:

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 blood... Therefore be on the alert...

Why? Because people whom Paul called, “savage wolves” will “come in among you, not sparing the flock”... “men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them”...

So, you tell me- is this Prophecy by the Apostle Paul something to be concerned about?

So, God has laid on my heart to take a brief “vacation” from our “journey” through the **Epistle of James** to begin this new year with a series of Sermons about what the Passage we just heard read- says; and what “Being on Guard for

Yourselves and the Flock” against these “savage wolves”, who will come in to teach perverse things” looks like in the 21st Century.

Now many times, it helps to understand what we are doing to become a biblical Church- by saying the same thing in different ways- so we may assure that we truly understand. So, on that note- the Goal of the Elders for this Church is NOT

- ✓ To be Baptist
- ✓ To be Presbyterian
- ✓ To be Reformed

... and I don't say that because I have a quarrel with these groups- even though I DO believe that “Reformed Theology”¹ is the correct exposition of Scripture. I say this to simply help all of us to keep our eyes on what is *primary* and *absolute*- the God/Man, Jesus Christ- along with both His finished and ongoing Work² on our behalf.

And the Way the Goal of becoming a biblical Church will be *accomplished* is for every genuinely saved Member of the Covenant of Peace Church:

- ✓ To Love Jesus
- ✓ To Enjoy God
- ✓ To Delight Ourselves in the Lord
- ✓ To See Jesus as the Treasure of the Universe
- ✓ To be Led by God the Spirit
- ✓ To Believe and Love the Truth
- ✓ To be Submitted to the Authority of Scripture

But we must understand that these things do not happen to people by accident. Nobody trips and falls into loving Jesus and of struggling against the lusts of our flesh, by the Power of the Holy Spirit, to be found humbly and joyfully submitted to the Authority of Scripture, in our daily lives- all to the Glory of God; or of loving the Truth. These things must be *developed* in people's minds and hearts *on* purpose and *with* purpose- in an ongoing and consistent manner- or they simply won't happen.

So, these things will only be accomplished with us through the ongoing Work of the Leadership of this Church in Preaching and Teaching what Paul called, the “**whole purpose of God**” (The Acts 20:27b); and through Biblical

¹ “Reformed Theology” is simply another term to describe the “Sovereignty of God in Salvation” that we also call, the “Doctrines of Grace”

² The “finished Work” of Jesus is His sinless Life; His vicarious (substitutionary) Death; His literal and physical Resurrection; and His bodily Ascension to sit down at the “Right Hand” of God. Jesus' “ongoing Work” is His constant Intercession for us before God.

Counseling; Edification; Encouragement; Correction; and Reproving and Rebuking when needed.

But it will also be accomplished by the Elders of this Church being on Guard- for ourselves and for the flock and to guard the Church against savage wolves- who will preach and teach perverse things.

So, this is NOT a hobby with me. This is NOT something I talk about for a few hours on Sunday. As my dear wife can attest- I have never been more serious about these things than I am right this minute. I just turned 66 last month- but instead of planning to slow down and plan to retire, so I can play shuffle board and collect sea shells- I pray I can do MORE; and preach MORE; and teach MORE; and be MORE used by God than at any time in my life.

I have never been more hungry for Jesus; more desirous of living my life as though I truly see Jesus as being the Treasure of the Universe; and more thirsty for Jesus to be the ONLY Head of this Church- than I am right now. And as a result of all this- I see Truth as my greatest Friend. Absolute, Biblical Truth is “ground zero” for the Christian Church. Always has been and always will be. Because everything we do; everything we believe; and everything we say- comes from knowing and believing the Truth. So, without the Truth- we have nothing. So, the Christian Church has always and will always be about the Truth.

But that means that Heresy and False Teaching- even lazy and sloppy Theology- is a real Danger. And it is a real and serious Threat to everything we say we want. And it is the greatest Enemy we have now and ever will have.

Now please don't misunderstand me. I love my country and I am appalled at what I see going on around me. So, please do not take my silence or my lack of “getting involved” with Politics as meaning that I don't care. I do care. A lot. And I am as angry as many of you. But I know that I can't do both. So, if you want your Pastor to get *more* political- then I will have to get *less* spiritual. And if I were you- I would want *my* Pastor to be on his face before God in Prayer; and in the

Book MORE than ever before- not less.

Now we are on the tail-end of an experiment with Democracy called, the “United States”. And so, for almost 250 years- the Christian Church has enjoyed *unprecedented* freedom to herald the glorious Gospel- unhindered and unfettered. In fact, Christianity in general and believers in specific have actually been *avored* in this country; and laws have been passed that gave the Church the ability to spread the Gospel around the world like no other nation in history.

But if we are not careful- we might think that this unprecedented Freedom is normal and natural. It isn't. The American Church has enjoyed an almost 250 year-old God-blessed “Reprieve” from the Hostility and Persecution that has been

the norm for the overwhelming majority of believers since Peter preached outside the Upper Room. For the majority of its 2,000 year history- the Church and individual believers have been attacked; imprisoned; beaten; tortured; jailed; stripped of all possessions; and even martyred for that great Name of Jesus. But for nearly a quarter of a millennial- we, here in America, have been mostly spared from that. Our Persecution consists MOSTLY of talk and of people shunning us. *Sometimes* we pay a price at work; and *sometimes* we lose out financially because we are Christians. But rarely do any of us endure what other believers endure almost routinely.

But it is very possible that we will see an increase of Hostility toward the Church in general and Christians in particular in the next few years- in this country. It is very possible that we will actually see legislation passed that, in effect, will make it against the law in the United States to be a practicing Christian. Now I don't want that to happen- but I think it will. But I've been preaching about this for almost 50 years. So, in reality, I'm shocked that it has taken this long.

Now perhaps God will be merciful and give us a few more years where the Church is respected; and Christianity is favored. I pray He will. But, eventually, it will stop. And when it does stop- it will NOT be time for the Rapture. It will simply allow American Christians to live underneath the very *same* Hostility and Persecution that all the other believers in all the other countries of the world have ALWAYS had to live under.

I find it amazingly arrogant that American Christians actually think it's time for Jesus to come back- simply because we are just *beginning* to suffer like other believers have *always* suffered. Why should we be spared what is simply "Normal Christianity"? Do we really think we are more important than the other brothers and sisters? Do we really think God loves us more than them?

But we need to understand that *external* Persecution is not nearly as dangerous as *internal* Heresy. Now it is true that being beaten hurts our bodies more than not believing in the Trinity. But, historically speaking, all Persecution is *external* to the Church. Unbelieving and evil people physically or financially or emotionally or legally attack and fight against the Church. And so, Persecution has, historically, actually *strengthened* the Church. The 2,000 year History of Christianity tells us that the greatest expanse of Christianity has occurred in those nations where Christianity has been an illegal and persecuted minority.

But Heresy is always *internal*. Heresy and false Teaching occurs when a professing believer *inside* the Church is, first deceived themselves, and then seeks to deceive others. And, historically, that has always *demoralized* the saints. And it usually results in periods of lukewarm and shallow believers.

So, God has burdened me to begin this new year by talking a short “vacation” from our “journey” through the **Epistle of James** to preach a series of Sermons on the dangers of Heresy and of wayward Teachings that pervert the true, biblical Gospel. And so, before we get into the specifics, I want to lay the groundwork for what I’m talking about and what I’m NOT talking about when I use the term, “Heresy” or “False Teaching.”

So, “Yes!” I love Reformed Theology. But I love the Bible *more*. And by saying that- I don’t mean to say that Reformed Theology is, somehow, at odds with the Bible. It isn’t. I say that- simply to keep *myself* grounded that the Bible *supersedes* ALL humanly developed theologies- even the ones that are correct.

And “Yes!” I love the Bible. But I love Jesus *more*. And, again, by saying that- I don’t mean to suggest that the Bible is, in any way, at odds with Jesus. It isn’t. I hope that, by now, you know that I believe that the 66 Books of the Holy Bible are the Inspired, Inerrant, and Infallible Word of the living God.

I say that- simply to remind *myself* that the Lord Jesus Christ is Who I worship; and Jesus is Who I wish to be near to; and Jesus is Who I want to please and adore and celebrate- NOT merely that I have been gifted to understand deep and profound biblical Truths; or that I have the Power to cast out devils; or that I have the Faith to move mountains. Here is what Jesus Himself said about this in **Luke 10:17-20**:

17 The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name."

18 And He said to them, "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning.

19 Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you.

20 Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven."

So, these things are what helps we Elders to remain Faithful, Fruitful, and Busy about *what* we are doing and *why*. The Prophet spoke for God in **Isaiah 66:2b** and said,

... “But to this one I will look, To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.

... and the Elders of the Covenant of Peace Church earnestly seek to be like that- that we are, by God’s Grace, seeking Humility. That we are, by God’s Grace, striving to be broken and contrite of spirit; and that we are, to God’s Glory, a group

that actually so reverences God's Word that we tremble at it. But we aren't leaving that to chance. So, every Saturday morning, the Elders meet together. And we actually cry out to God that He will empower us to be such a people- so that Jesus may be all in all.

But it will also help us to understand that we are NOT striving to teach or believe or to live. So, our Goal is NOT:

- To think we are Right and everyone who disagrees with us- is wrong
- To dismiss everyone else- who may not know or understand what God has blessed us to know and understand

I know that, as a man, I have the capacity to be as wrong; and as evil; and as unbiblical as the worst person on earth. And so, I have never said; and I don't believe; and I pray that I don't come across as believing- that I am Right and whoever disagrees with me is wrong. What I say is that, *"God is Right. God's Word and Spirit are Right. And it is therefore incumbent on all of us to work hard to come into alignment with Who God is; and What God has done; and What God has said in Scripture."*

So, what keeps us- is God- in all three Persons- using His marvelous Grace to grant to us the ability to understand His Word and to believe it is true. And then it is God- in all three Persons- Who, by His Grace, empowers us to change what needs changing; and to keep what needs to be kept- so that every year- we become more and more in line with sacred Writ.

We also know that, according to the Apostle Peter, coming into Truth is NOT an Event- but a Process. Here is what he infallibly wrote in

2Peter 3:17&18

17 You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness,

18 but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

So, we are to GROW in two things:

1. The Grace of God
2. The Knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ

Now by using the verb, "to Grow", the Apostle was recognizing that coming into what the Bible actually teaches takes time. And I understand why I need to grow in the Knowledge of Jesus- that is just another way of saying that I need to

grow in the Knowledge of the Truth. And as I comprehend more Truth- the way I live my daily life becomes *more* godly.

But how do I “grow” in Grace? Does God give me *more* Grace as I progress in my Knowledge of the Truth? No. But I grow in my *understanding* of Grace. And I grow in my *appreciation* of Grace; And I grow in how I *use* Grace; and how Grace uses me. And so, I grow in how Grace becomes more and more vital to my everyday walk with God- until I realize what both John the Baptist and the Apostle John meant in **John 1:15-18**, when they said,

15 John [the Baptist] testified about Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'"

16 For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace.

17 For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.

18 No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.

Here John the Baptist exclaims that Jesus, “**has a higher rank than I, for [because] He existed before me**”. Then in verses 16&17- the Apostle John commented on what John the Baptist said, by telling us that having the Fullness of God is the result of having “**Grace upon Grace**”. So, there is no Growth in God- without the Grace of God. In fact, the more godly and person becomes; the more biblical he becomes- the more he realizes that he is actually NOTHING but a wicked sinner and that EVERYTHING he has- is by God’s Grace and NOT because of anything he has done or said.

Even when we get to Heaven and we are in the very Presence of God- we will be there- by Grace. So, Grace is NOT something we need to be saved and then we are on our own. No, the more we grow in the Knowledge of God- the more we see our NEED for Grace; and the MORE Grace becomes a part of our lives. And if that is not happening- then we are deceived and we are NOT growing in the Knowledge of God.

We must understand that every Heretic uses the Bible; and his study; and his knowledge of the Bible; to prove his point. So, we do NOT arrive at Truth simply by “putting in the time”. Now we should “put in the time”. But without the Grace of God- sovereignly and mercifully ALLOWING us to understand- we will simply become deceived- as we continue to study the Bible.

And then the Apostle told us that both “Grace and Truth” were REALIZED in, by, and through belief in Jesus. Now both Grace and Truth existed BEFORE Jesus was born. Everyone in the Old Testament, who was truly saved, was saved

by Grace. And God's Truth has ALWAYS been foremost in God's Mind. But both Grace and Truth were greatly *limited* to humans until Jesus was manifested in the flesh.

And then in verse 18, John the Apostle calls Jesus, the **“only begotten God”**, Who is, **“in the bosom of the Father”**. So, He is both God and is in the Bosom of God. So, how does that work? That is part of the Mystery of the triune Godhead that we should both marvel at and trust in.

The point I am making here is that, because we are fallen creatures- we must guard our hearts that our Knowledge of the Truth doesn't serve to puff us up to the point where we become proud in our Knowledge; and begin to look down on those who either haven't learned what we have learned; or who have no idea- YET- how to “put the pieces together”. And God forbid that we would call these people “Heretics” simply because they either don't know certain things about God or don't yet understand them.

Here is a great Danger of which we need to be aware. People can be wrong about some things about the Bible- and NOT be Heretics. They can *believe* wrongly; and even *teach* wrongly; and be saved and on their way to Heaven. So, simply being *incorrect* about certain Issues does NOT, in and of itself, make them to be “Heretics”.

Again, the Grace of God will help us in this area. Please think back to a time when you were wrong about certain aspects of Divine Truth. And remember that you were convinced that you were right. Yet, as you *continued* to study and read and think and ponder and meditate and ask Questions and listen- God brought you out of that incorrect believing and into the Truth. Well, how did He do that? No doubt, God used your *own* time of reading and studying the Bible. And we thank Gd for that. But most probably, one of the most important Means of Grace was by you sitting underneath good, solid, biblical Preaching and Teaching for an extended period of time. And so, that was the Grace of God at work in your life- AFTER you were saved.

But isn't that going on even now? And if you say, “No!”, then you are saying that you have already arrived at full maturity and have no more room to grow. And that doesn't mean it's true- it simply means you are arrogant and deceived about yourself. Because the Truth is that you are not nearly as knowledgeable as you would like to believe.

But if you say, “Yes!”, then you are admitting that you are STILL not correct about everything you believe. And that means that you are INCORRECT about some things- that you are, in fact, WRONG about some things. And that means that you STILL have room to grow in both God's Grace and in the Knowledge of the Truth.

But if that is true- and you are NOT correct about everything you

believe- and you are actually WRONG about some things- are you saved? Yes, if you have ever experienced the Miracle of the New Birth. But how could I be saved and wrong about some things? Because God has designed Salvation in such a way that we are CONSTANTLY growing in both God's Grace and in the Knowledge of the Truth. And that means that we will ALWAYS be growing and that we will NEVER reach full Maturity about everything in this life and on this earth.

And that means that we will ALWAYS be crying out to God to help us to learn. That we will ALWAYS be reading and studying and asking and listening and learning. And it means that we will ALWAYS be repenting- when we find out we were wrong about certain things.

So, Salvation is NOT about us understanding all Truths- even as Salvation is NOT about the elimination of all Sin in our lives. And yet, God has told us to keep on growing in both Grace and in our Knowledge of the Truth.

And that tells us that while all Truth is Truth- not all Truth is equal. There are *some* areas of Divine Truth that are so vital- that they determine whether we are saved or not. And this is the area where real Heresy exists. And then there are other areas of Truth that help us to love Jesus *more* and obey Him *better*- but they do NOT determine whether we possess Eternal Life.

NO part of the Bible is irrelevant. Every Word is important. **“All Scripture is “God breathed” (Inspired) and is profitable for:**

- ✓ Teaching
- ✓ Reproof
- ✓ Correction
- ✓ Training in Righteousness

... so, that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every Good Work” (2Timothy 3:16&17)

... yet *some* parts of the Divine Truth of the Bible are “non-negotiable” and belief in them is REQUIRED for Salvation. While other parts are important and yet there is room for *some measure* of disagreement – *usually* along the lines of *how* to apply the Truth of Scripture to our lives.

The parts of the Infallible Scriptures of which belief in them is REQUIRED for Salvation are called, “Essential Truth”; while the other parts fall into second or third tier levels of Truth. But it is along the lines of Essential Truth where you will find Heresy. And it is along all areas where you will find “False Teaching”.

Now don't misunderstand me. All Heresy is False. But not all False Teaching rises to the level of being real, sure- nuff Heresy. But all Teaching that

isn't true- is wrong and is dangerous. So, it isn't that we are only concerned about "Heresy". We need to try as hard as possible to be correct/biblical about EVERYTHING we believe and teach. Because it is just as much Sin to *believe* wrongly as it is to *do* wrongly. But as I said, that takes time. Thanks be to God, that we can be saved; and go to Heaven; and not even know *anything* about certain aspects of the Bible.

But we are NOT saved; and we are NOT going to Heaven- if we are wrong about "Essential Truth." And that means that we need to define just what "Essential Truth" is. So, please turn with me to the **Epistle of Jude**.

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 handed down to the saints.

Here, the half-brother of Jesus (and brother of James), a man named "Judah" (Hebrew) or "Judas" (Greek), whose name was anglicanized as "Jude" infallibly wrote that he was GOING to write an Epistle about the glory of our "Common Salvation". In other words, Jude was planning to write an inspired, inerrant, and infallible Letter about the fact that everyone who is saved is saved the same way: "by" the Grace of God and "through" the Gift of "Saving Faith". And that would have made for a very wonderful Letter.

But as Jude was beginning to write a Letter about the Common Salvation- God the Holy Spirit moved on him to burden his heart to see the need- Jude called it a "**necessity**" to, instead, pen down a Letter where he appealed to the genuine believers of the Church that they

... contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.

Now the word translated here as "**contend**" comes from a Greek word (*epagoenizomai*; Strong's#1864) that means: *To fight for something important*. And this is the only place in the entire Bible where that word is used. And the word that was translated here as "**earnestly**" comes from the very *same* Greek word. So, by using the same Greek word twice- Jude was *emphasizing* the way or the manner in which we are to contend.

So, what are we to earnestly or sincerely fight for? Jude says,

... for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.

So, we are to earnestly or sincerely fight for the Faith; the Christian Faith; the Orthodox Faith; the Divine Truth; Essential Truth- that was, **“once for all handed down to the saints.”**

Now notice that Jude did NOT say, “the Faith that was supernaturally revealed”; or “the Faith that was received by direct Divine Revelation.” – even though both Statements would have been true. The Christian Faith; the Divine Truth of the New Covenant WAS supernaturally revealed to us through the Gift of the Office of the Apostles. And this Faith WAS received by direct Divine Revelation. And yet, Jude did NOT say that. Why? Because AFTER the Christian Faith was received- that one time- it will NEVER be “received” again. And once it was supernaturally revealed- one time- it will NEVER be “revealed” again. This Faith- that was- one time- supernaturally revealed to the Apostles and this Faith that was- one time- received by direct Divine Revelation- will now be propagated throughout the entire world- ONLY- by being **“handed down to the saints”**.

How? In the 66 Books of the Holy Bible. There will NEVER be any *additions* to this Faith; and there will NEVER be any *subtractions*. Not supernaturally; not divinely; not even by angels. It is what it is. And it is perfect in both part and in whole. And so, it *cannot* be improved on; and it will *never* be obsolete or outdated.

Any changes- even with the very best of intentions- *fundamentally* alters what this Faith is. And those changes alter it- to the point where it isn't the same. So, when ANYTHING is either added or taken away from this “once- for- all- handed- down- to- the- saints”- Faith- you no longer have what was initially divinely received; and what was initially supernaturally revealed. You have a completely different Religion that *cannot* forgive a single Sin or save a single soul.

Now why did Jude see the need to change the focus of his Letter? Because he saw something that deeply and profoundly troubled him. Well, what deeply and profoundly troubled Jude?

Jude 4

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.

Now this warning by Jude is much more serious than a warning against people, who are either confused about certain areas of Divine Truth; or who have been either poorly taught or not taught at all. Notice the characteristics of the people Jude is talking about:

- ✓ **Certain persons**

- ✓ **Those who “crept in unnoticed”**
- ✓ **Those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation**
- ✓ **Ungodly persons**

Now why am I being so specific about dividing between real Heretics and those who are simply confused or ignorant or inconsistent about certain aspects of the Bible? Because real Heretics CANNOT be forgiven; and they CANNOT be saved. God has allowed them do act- in order to strengthen the Church- as the Church *responds* to the Heresy. Yet these Heretics themselves will be damned. Jude says they were,

... long beforehand marked out for this condemnation

... and the Apostle Peter said that these Heretics will,

2Peter 2:1-3

... secretly introduce destructive heresies... bringing swift destruction upon themselves... their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

... yet others, who, at one time, were confused or inconsistent or just incorrect about what they believed and taught- were saved. And they have *continued* to love and follow Jesus even more- as they were gifted with realizing they were wrong and incorrect and inconsistent- and they repented and began to believe and teach- more in line with Scripture. These are the people, who are still growing in Grace and in the Knowledge of Jesus. And they are NOT Heretics and should NOT be treated as Heretics.

Now look what Jude says these “**certain ungodly persons**”, who “**crept in unnoticed**”, and who were “**long beforehand marked out for this Condemnation**” did:

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

Now these people do NOT literally “turn the Grace of God into licentiousness”³. They do NOT have the Power to change God’s Grace. But what they do- through their Heresies- is they teach *about* the Grace of God- in such a way- that causes others to *believe wrongly*; or to be *deceived* about the Grace of

³ Sexual sins; lewd character and behavior; a wanton disregard of laws, rules and Truth.

God; and to believe what is NOT true. And the kicker is that they do this on purpose. These are evil people- who mean to deceive others.

And then they do the very same thing about Jesus- in either His Person (Who Jesus is) and/or in what Jesus has done. So, these people teach things what the Bible does NOT say about these two Issues- while NOT teaching what the Bible *does* say. And the result is that people believe wrongly about both Jesus and the Grace of God.

Now *why* is this such a serious matter? Two reasons:

1. No one is saved without believing correctly about Who Jesus is and What Jesus has done
2. No one will live a godly life without believing correctly about the Grace of God

... so, these are the two Issues that constitute “Essential Truth”. They also comprise both Orthodoxy (right believing) and Orthopraxy (right living). And if you think about it- these are the two main Issues that deal with Salvation.

Now we must remember that Christianity is the only Religion in the history of the world that teaches that wicked sinners are forgiven and made Righteous by what we believe in; and by what we trust in; and in what we confess- and NOT by what we do. All of the “doing” in Christianity is carried as a weak and frail human Response to the sovereign Work that God has already done in us. And because that is true- then what we believe- *matters*. And that is *eternally* important as it pertains to “Essential Truth.”

Now, periodically, the Church has attempted to define “Essential Truth” in a way that is easily understood and easily believed. And, periodically, the Church has seen that all of these attempts have failed in one or more areas:

1. Their efforts were NOT comprehensive
2. Their efforts became cumbersome

... and both of these problems have to do with the nature of how Heresies enter into the Church; how they are confronted; and how they are defeated.

We must realize that, almost as soon as the specific Revelation of the New Covenant was begun- Heresies began to attack the Word of God and to confuse either the Person and Work of Jesus or the Grace of God in the minds of God’s people.

When the Church began- God’s people were happy and celebrating their Salvation and the forgiveness of their Sins. And they were more than willing to

endure horrific Persecution. Because they understood that they were wicked sinners, who deserved nothing but the Wrath of an infinitely Holy God. And so, they assembled together under great duress; and always with the notion that at any moment- they could be annihilated by evil men and a hostile Government. And yet, they came; and yet they gathered; and yet they prayed; and they learned and were taught the “Apostle’s Teaching”; and they partook of the Lord’s Table (and water Baptism of believers) and they prayed- O how they prayed! They prayed! and they prayed! and they prayed! Truly Prayer was the aroma of the Church. The sweet fragrance of the Presence of God in their Prayer Meetings and their times of Bible Study and the Sacraments- empowered them to rejoice as they were persecuted and were imprisoned and were martyred.

But even though they were happy and were rejoicing in their Salvation- the people of the early Church were, to a large degree, naïve. They were very basic in their Beliefs; and very simple in their focus. And so, God allowed satan to enter into the Church- to begin to teach Heresies.

Now why would a Good God allow evil men to come into the Church to try to deceive the flock? To *force* the Leaders of the Church out of their naiveté; and to *force* them into the Scriptures to find Answers and Solutions (Doctrines) to ward off the Heresies.

And, over the years, the Church responded to the various Heresies by hammering out most of the beloved Doctrines that we hold to and cherish today. For example, the “Doctrine of the Trinity” that we unashamedly pray about; and sing about; and teach in this Church- was hammered out by the Leaders of the Church beginning in the 2nd Century in the fires of warring against the Apostasy and Heresy of their day.

So too with most of the Truths that we hold dear today. Doctrines are developed by the Church to fight against Heresies. Because the best remedy for False Teaching- is the Truth. The best remedy for spiritual Darkness- is spiritual Light. And the best remedy for Ignorance of the Truth- is the Knowledge of the Truth.

But that doesn’t happen over a single weekend. The effort by the Church to become biblical is now entering its *third* millennial. Because there simply are no shortcuts. We, who serve God in our day, are the product of all those who came before us. So, we are to be faithful to confront the savage wolves of *our* day and their wicked and perverse Teachings. And we are to find Answers and Solutions and Doctrines from the Scriptures and from the Scriptures alone- to defeat them in our day- even as those who came before us did.

But we are NOT to re-invent the wheel. We are to humbly submit to the Work of Grace in the lives of Leaders past- who loved God and who loved God’s Word and who fought valiantly against the savage wolves of their day- who tried

to bring in Heresies. And we are to stand on the mountain of biblical Truth that God built through them- and we are to carry the torch up the Mountain a little bit further. Because the sad reality is that what Jude and Peter taught- is STILL ongoing. And “certain men” are STILL being used by satan to try to turn **the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.** And so, our efforts to recognize and then defeat the Heresies of our day- by Scripture alone- is also STILL ongoing.

So, even though we see great chaos all around us- I tell you- we should all be encouraged. Because, the Light of God’s Truth shines the best- when it is the darkest. So, even with all that is going on- Jesus Christ is STILL building His Church, dear friends, and the very Gates of Hades itself will NOT prevail against it! So, while we may very well lose our country- we will NEVER lose the Church!

So, go with me into this Series as we begin this new year and let us pray that we will all remain Faithful, and Fruitful, and Busy in the Work of the Lord- until God takes us home or until Jesus comes back!

Amen. Let’s pray.

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The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Be watchful and quicken your pace. Soli Deo Gloria. For the Glory of God alone.

