

Always Reforming

Jude 3, 4; 2 Peter 2:1–3¹

Carried Away.

In 2nd Peter, chapter 1, we're given a glimpse behind the curtain regarding the way in which God breathed out His word through the apostles and prophets. In verses 20 and 21, Peter wrote:

²⁰ ...knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ^{2 Peter 1:20} ESV

The words “someones own interpretation here, carries the sense of “an interpretation understood as the release or unraveling of something.” It's from a root that means to loose. So, it's not speaking of the private interpretation of a prophecy that someone else has made and is already out there in the world; rather, as one commentator notes:

In the present context, Peter is arguing that the prophetic testimony **in Scripture** comes from God, including both the prophetic visions [and] the prophetic words that describe and interpret them... **The idea, then, is that the prophetic Scriptures and their meaning originate with God and not with human authors.**²

Which should be evident from verse 21:

²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God **as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.** ^{2 Peter 1:21} ESV

The image suggested here has often been that of a sailboat being carried along by the wind, and we see a beautiful illustration of how this works in the opening verses of Jude—specifically Jude, verse 3—where he wrote:

³ Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation... ^{Jude 3} ESV

That's what he wanted to do when he sat down to write a letter to the people of God. He wanted—he intended; he was very eager—to write

¹ ...To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ... ^{Jude 1} ESV

about our common salvation. Instead, he found it necessary—he was compelled by the Spirit—to write about something else. Specifically, as he wrote at the end of verse 3:

...I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. ^{Jude 3} ESV

What we have then, is not the letter that Jude meant to write, but the letter that God meant for him to write; the letter that came about as the Spirit of God carried him along, breathing the

¹ All Scripture citations, unless otherwise indicated, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
² R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version (2015 Edition)* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), 2257.

word through him, for the edification of God’s people—for the edification of those in the first century to whom Jude was writing, and for the edification of those who are reading it today.

For some, this is probably a little troubling. We would much prefer letters, and sermons, and conversations about our common salvation, at least if by “our common salvation” we mean sermons, letters, and conversations about grace without law, faith without works, and (for some today), even a Christianity without Christ. But in Hebrews chapter 6, the author, wanting his readers to press on to maturity makes a statement about what he regards to be “the elementary doctrine of Christ,” describing it as:

¹ ...repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, ² of the teaching of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. ^{Hebrews 6:1–2 ASV3}

In some places today, teaching like that would be a master class in theology, never mind the elementary principles of the gospel. Still, many people would prefer a nice little message on John 3, verse 16:

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” ^{John 3:16 ESV}

and that without reference to John 3, verses 18 and 19, which say:

¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ^{John 3:18–19 ESV}

But, like Jude, the writer to the Hebrews was ultimately compelled to press on to other things, so that his readers would be able to realize the full assurance of their hope until the end, not being sluggish—not being lazy—in their walk with God, but imitators of those who through faith and patience would inherit the promises.⁴ The rest of Hebrews bears witness to this, and he sums it up in the statement,

³ Consider him... ^{Hebrews 12:3 ESV}

(that would be, Jesus Christ),

...who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. ⁴ **In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.** ^{Hebrews 12:3–4 ESV}

Once for All.

But what is it that these biblical authors were compelled by the power of the Holy Spirit to write? What was the letter that God intended? Well, back to Jude, verse 3.

³ *American Standard Version* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995).

⁴ Cf. Hebrews 6:9–12.

³ Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write **appealing to you to contend...** Jude 3 ESV

(literally, “to struggle”, “to fight”, “to strive”—we get our English word “agonize” from this Greek root, so, to “contend *earnestly*” as some translations have it),

...for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. Jude 3 ESV

Ultimately then, the difference is one of emphasis. What Jude wanted was to write about “our common salvation” (an expression that can be understood as parallel to “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints”). Note, then, that there is this faith, which is (as one author puts it), “the doctrinal content of the message taught by the apostles and held in common by all Christians.”⁵ This is what Jude intended to write about, but instead of writing **about** it—instead of producing the Gospel according to Jude, or something along those lines—he wrote to exhort his readers to take hold on that body of biblical and apostolic teaching to such an extent that we would be willing to contend, struggle, agonize, strive, and even fight **for** it.

And why? Precisely because it was, is, and always will be “the faith that was **once for all** delivered to the saints. The apostle Paul wrote in much this same vein in Galatians, chapter 1. There he said,

⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷ **not that there is another one...** Galatians 1:6–7 ESV

There is only one gospel—one faith, once for all delivered to the saints—

...but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. Galatians 1:7 ESV

And please, pay attention to this important concept. Paul wrote, “there are some who trouble you and **want to distort the gospel of Christ.**” See, whatever else you might be tempted to think or say about him, Satan is not stupid. Most professing Christians are not likely to be led astray by some pop star praising the lord of darkness at the Grammy celebrations or by blasphemous images during the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games, but that’s not how Satan spread his lies. Writing in 2nd Corinthians 11 about the same kind of false teachers that he was addressing in Galatians 1, Paul said,

¹³ ...such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness... ² Corinthians 11:13–15 ESV

And they wont come with free copies of the Satanic Bible and Ritual. They will come with something that sounds a lot like the gospel. They will come (some, to your very doorstep)

⁵ R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version (2015 Edition)* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), 2291.

with a slightly distorted version of the gospel—one that sounds credible but in the end leads to destruction. “But,” Paul went on in Galatians 1:

⁸ ...even if **we** or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. Galatians 1:8 ESV

which is a very interesting way of highlighting this “once for all delivered to the saints” idea. In Galatians 1, Paul said that the message that he had proclaimed was settled and binding to the extent that even if he himself, or an angel from heaven (and there’s a whole sermon in that expression), were to come with a gospel “other” than, or beside that which had already been given, then whoever it was—angel or apostle—was to be accursed.

And, while there is some disagreement about the precise meaning of the anathema—the curse—spoken here, everyone agrees that the word is very strong. One commentator suggests that it is a translation of a Hebrew word that means,

Dedicated to God without ransom...given over to annihilation, to death...⁶

Regardless, the strength of the idea is compounded by its repetition in verse 9.

⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. Galatians 1:9 ESV

In our text, Jude went on in verse 4 to say of such people:

⁴ For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation... Jude 4 ESV

And, who are they?

...ungodly people... Jude 4 ESV

he names them. People

...who **pervert the grace of our God into sensuality** and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. Jude 4 ESV

Of course, we do not have time this morning to explore this further, but Peter made the same connection between false teaching and sensuality in 2nd Peter 2, writing:

¹ But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. 2 Peter 2:1–2 ESV

And again, they will not knock on the door, introduce themselves and say, “Hi, I’m here today to deny that Jesus Christ is Lord.” So, how will they do it? 2nd Peter 2, verse 2:

⁶ John Peter Lange, Philip Schaff, and Otto Schmoller, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Galatians*, ed. M. B. Riddle, trans. C. C. Starbuck (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 19.

² And many will follow **their sensuality**, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. 2 Peter 2:1–2 ESV

Always Reforming?

The thing is, some have gone so far as to imply that this openness to change is the very basis of the statement, “The church Reformed, and always reforming...” but how can we have a faith that was “once for all delivered to the saints,” a gospel that is so settled that even an angel from heaven cannot make alterations to suit the times, a word for which we are to contend earnestly, and at the same time, be always willing to change to accommodate the trajectory of the culture around us? The answer, I believe, is that we cannot.

We cannot approach the Gospel in the way that some people approach certain legal documents—constitutions and so forth—as though they were “living” documents that are constantly in a state of flux, always subject to the winds and whims of history, culture, and creative approaches to theology that inevitably pretend to know better than those who stood generations, even millennia, closer to the originals than we ourselves. Rather, as Jude exhorted the people of God, we must simply

³ ...contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. Jude 3 NASB7

How are we to do this? Well, Paul said it this way in Philippians 2. We are called to be

¹⁵ ...blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, ¹⁶ **holding fast to the word of life...** Philippians 2:15–16 ESV

And Peter? ^{2nd} Peter 3, verses 17 and 18:

¹⁷ You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. ¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ... 2 Peter 3:17–18 ESV

And Jude? He wrote this in verses 20 – 23:

²⁰ But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith... Jude 20 ESV

(that faith once for all delivered to the saints in God’s holy Word)

...and praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. Jude 20–21 ESV

But more still (and this is important), he said:

²² ...have mercy on those who doubt; ²³ save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh. Jude 22–23 ESV

In other words, yes, “Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda.” “The church Reformed and always to be reformed,” but always being reformed by the Word and Spirit of God. So, on this Reformation Sunday morning, may we be reminded to

³ ...contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. Jude 3 NASB

May we also build ourselves up in that very same faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, and keeping ourselves in the love of God, even as we wait for

...the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. Jude 21 ESV

And I will conclude this morning with Jude’s conclusion:

²⁴ Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, ²⁵ to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever.
Amen. Jude 24–25 ESV