

Perilous Times Aboard the Disciple-Ship

Michael F. Bird



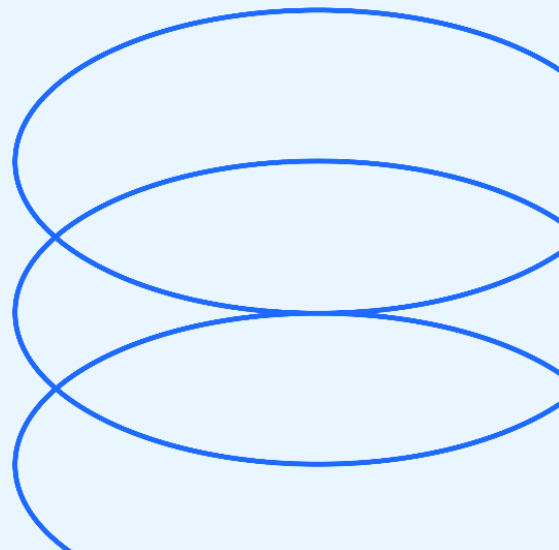
About the Author

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In Perilous Times ...



All ages are perilous, some more than others. However, our age faces unusual and unprecedented perils. We are living through a technological revolution unlike anything the world has witnessed before. In addition, we are living through geopolitical conflicts of an intensity not seen since the Second World War. If that were not bad enough, also unique to our age are torrid debates about renewable energy and immigration. The churches in the West are convulsing in decay or languishing in despair. Various Christian churches are declining or even closing. The legal landscape can also create tensions between religious freedoms and the values of leading institutions. More teenagers than ever are growing up with anxiety and addiction. YouTube is filled with crackpots and cults pushing crazy ideas about God and religion. There are frightening people in the world, and many of those people can access you, your information, and even your children through a smartphone, tablet, or laptop. One need not be part of a doomsday cult to appreciate the gravity of the threats faced by the planet, by continents, nations, governments, families, and even people of faith. Our age is one of trouble, anxiety, and even peril. While the scale of the peril is not unique, the types of threats, dangers, and religious trends certainly are!¹

But if there is one biblical book that I believe gives us resources on how to think, pray, and behave in these perilous times, it is the epistle of Jude.

The epistle was written by Jude, a brother of both James and Jesus. It is a short letter, an exhortation for one or more assemblies facing various internal fractures caused by the arrival of false teachers with devious ideas, reporting strange dreams, and engaged in debauched behavior. This problem I would say has some analogy to members of your church becoming obsessed with some new podcast host, TikTok influencer, or YouTube crank pushing ideas with enough credence to get a hearing, enough sass and rhetoric to be entertaining, and enough subtlety to veil his or her heresy in ways that few can detect.

While I go back and forth in my own mind on the question of provenance, my current thinking is that the epistle of Jude was written to a group of Greek-speaking Jewish Christians who had fled from Judaea to Egypt, possibly as refugees from the turmoil and terrors that engulfed Judaea during the rebellion against Roman rule in AD 66–70.² That is a conjecture, but it is a proposal that arguably explains the letter's contents, purpose, and its strong reception in

¹ The sense of peril seems global in scale. In recent weeks, I have found myself having conversations with Christians in Ukraine, India, Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, America, Australia, New Zealand, and Uganda. (I have friends everywhere!) In each place, the dangers are real and varied (e.g., war, Buddhist nationalism, government discrimination, anti-conversion laws, prosperity gospel, a tribalized church, spiritual consumerism, secularism, etc.).

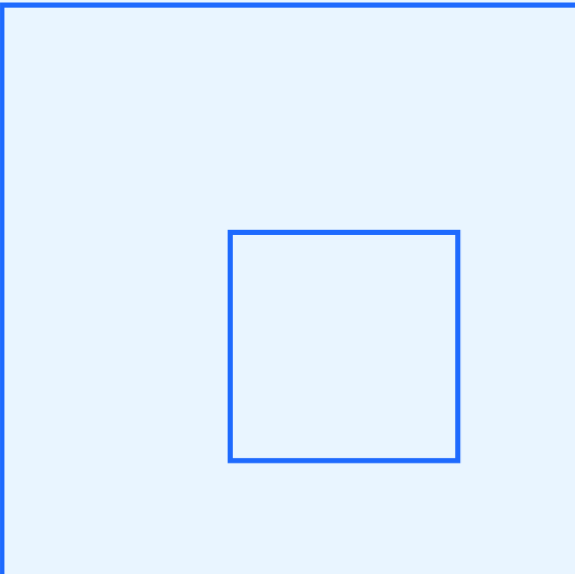
² See Michael F. Bird and N. T. Wright, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (SPCK, 2019), 736–40.

Egypt. (The first person to explicitly cite the letter is Clement of Alexandria in the late second century.) Such an audience would know a thing or two about the brutality of war, the vulnerability of migrants, the anxiety of religious divisions, and the importance of faithfulness in the face of adversity. That said, I believe that the epistle of Jude is truly an exhortation relevant to any congregation living in a perilous age.

So what does Jude say about being a resilient disciple when the chips are down, when strange ideas are circulating in the churches, and even when your closest church friends are being seduced by spiritual charlatans?

Jude calls us to vigilance in guarding our common faith, doing a spiritual inventory of ourselves, and keeping ourselves in God's love as we aspire to give God the glory in all that we do.

Contend for the Faith



*Dear friends, although I was making every effort to write to you concerning our common salvation, I considered it a necessity to write to you to encourage you to contend for the faith delivered once and for all to the saints. (Jude 1:3)*³

Jude states that he wanted to expound to his audience the benefits and imperatives of their “common salvation,” yet instead he feels that the gravity and urgency of the situation requires him to exhort them to “contend for the faith delivered once and for all to the saints.” Jude most likely has in mind here the memory of Jesus’s teachings and example, the deposit of apostolic instruction, the Jesus-centered way of interpreting the Scriptures, and the “way” of life appropriate for those born anew and baptized into the holy people of God. This deposit of faith, the “most holy faith” he will call it later, is what his audience needs to be reminded about and what they need to reconnect to in times of confusion and error.

Jude also calls people to “contend for the faith,” and the Greek word here is *epagōnizomai* (ἐπαγωνίζομαι), which means “to exert intense effort on behalf of something,” and in this instance it pertains to “the effort expended by the subject in a noble cause” such as struggling for the faith.⁴ This is athletic imagery for the struggle a competitor undergoes in a contest. Similarly, we are to enter the contest and to struggle on behalf of the faith. This summons us to the task of wise articulation of the faith and also of offering apologetic defenses of our faith.

Now, I partly inhabit an academic world where “apologist” is a dirty word. I once heard a particularly visceral critic of N. T. Wright call him “a book-a-year apologist.” For me, however, apologist is not a snide term of derision, because I believe in offering a defense, i.e., an *apologia*, for the things I believe to be true and meaningful. That includes the Christian faith, Christian ethics, the Christian way of being human, liberty and democracy, and fighting against the predatory gambling cartels in Australia. I struggle in the causes I consider worthy of defense, and Jude calls us to struggle in the defense of the faith that has been passed down to us.

It should go without saying that the doctrinal dangers and deviances of every age are different. I’m old enough to remember debates about prosperity, spiritual gifts, worship music, the lordship of Jesus, justification by faith, subordination in the Trinity, and more. As I cast my eyes over the current theological, technological, and cultural landscape, the challenges

³ All quotes from Scripture are taken from the Lexham English Bible (LEB).

⁴ Walter Bauer, [*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*](#), ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 356.

around and within the churches are equally threatening. It might be redefining what it means to be a human being, AI changing the world for the worst, the twisting of the church's allegiance towards political actors, external pressures to change confession and practices related to family, marriage, and sexuality, or even the rise of kinist projects endorsed with a Christian gloss.

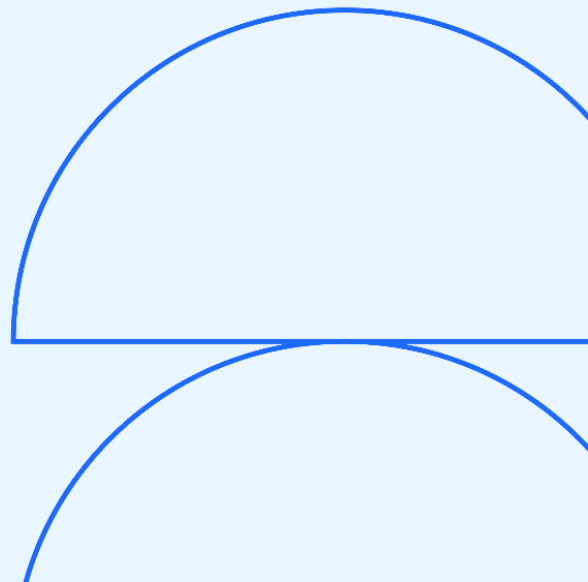
Irrespective of what challenges there are to Christian belief and what the many critics may say, as Matthew Harmon notes, "Jude presents the Christian life as a continual fight to maintain one's fidelity to the Lord."⁵ Jude wants us to be faithful to God by being faithful to "the faith" that we have received.

That does not mean being contentious over minute matters. There are the major doctrines (e.g., Trinity, atonement, scriptural authority), minor doctrines (e.g., church governments, meaning of the Lord's Supper, candidates for baptism), and matters of conscience (e.g., Bible translations, consumption of alcohol, preferred mode of schooling children). We should, as Paul taught, "pursue what promotes peace and what edifies one another" (Rom 14:19). Not all topics are worthy of debate, discipline, and division. Of course, even third-tier matters of conscience can be prized and should not be given up at the drop of a hat. That said, a key part of rightly contending for the faith is knowing clearly what is essential and what isn't, and where the stakes really lie. On the essentials, let us remember, the doctrines and behaviors you tolerate are the doctrines and behaviors you promote!

In a perilous age, we must contend for the way of life in Christ we have received, our apostolic faith, and hold fast to the path of righteousness. It means we must guard the gospel and fortify our faith, not because we are narrowly doctrinaire, but because how you live shows what you truly, really, and most certainly believe.

⁵ Matthew Harmon, *The God Who Judges and Saves: A Theology of 2 Peter and Jude* (Crossway, 2023), 83.

Avoid False Teachers



For certain men have slipped in stealthily, who were designated long ago for this condemnation, ungodly ones, who change the grace of our God into licentiousness and who deny our only Master and Lord Jesus Christ. ... Despite that, in the same way also these men, because of their dreams, defile the flesh and reject authority and blaspheme majestic beings. ... These people are grumblers, discontented, proceeding according to their desires, and their mouths speaking pompous words, showing partiality to gain an advantage. (Jude 1:4, 8, 16)

Jude had a lot to say about deviant interlopers infiltrating a church, and he does not mix his words about who they are and what they deserve. Jude is more than willing to deploy examples from the Old Testament to describe them and provide grounds to denounce them.

Now some of this might be Jude simply exercising standard Jewish sectarian tropes of denunciation against an out-group, as you might find in other Jewish literature. At the same time, there is a very clear specification on what he says about these interlopers, including what they believe and how they behave. To reverse engineer the content of the heresy in question, it seems as if these interlopers are typified by:

- They use grace as a license for sin
- They deny some aspect of Jesus's authority or power
- They claim to have had dreams
- They disbelieve in or denounce angels
- They pervert communal meals or love feasts
- They are selfish and intellectually shallow
- They engage in sexual immorality of some form
- They offer constant criticism even as they make much of themselves

While we might want to conjecture as to who this group was and what they believed, in the end we cannot be certain. We are left only with Jude's very forthright denunciation of the harmful doctrines and sinful debauchery of these interlopers.

The fact that Jude makes allusions to the fate of rebellious angels, Cain, Sodom and Gomorrah, the Hebrews who grumbled against God in the wilderness, the prophet Balaam, and Korah's rebellion against Moses and Aaron (see vv. 5–16), suggests that he does not think the divine judgment will turn out particularly well for them. They are persons for whom “the deep gloom of darkness has been reserved for eternity” (v. 13).

In the early church, various authors warned of the dangers of allowing itinerant prophets, teachers, and apostles to wander into your church and enjoy your hospitality without having

their teachings tested or their character confirmed. For instance, the *Didache* exhorts Christians to welcome visitors, but to be cautious if they turn out to be grifters who over-stay their welcome:

Now concerning the apostles and prophets, deal with them as follows in accordance with the rule of the gospel. Let every apostle who comes to you be welcomed as if he were the Lord. But he is not to stay for more than one day, unless there is need, in which case, he may stay another. But if he stays three days, he is a false prophet. And when the apostle leaves, he is to take nothing except bread until he finds his next night's lodging. But if he asks for money, he is a false prophet.⁶

Clement of Alexandria also notes that certain sects can infiltrate a church's common fellowship and corrupt their meals with unspeakable immoralities. In fact, Clement wonders if Jude is speaking about the group he's heard about called the Carpocratians:

These are the doctrines of our noble Carpocratians. They say that these people and some other zealots for the same vicious practices gather for dinner (I could never call their congregation a Christian love-feast), men and women together, and after they have stuffed themselves ("The Cyprian goddess is there when you are full," they say), they knock over the lamps, put out the light that would expose their fornicating "righteousness," and couple as they will with any woman they fancy. So in this love-feast they practice commonality. Then by daylight they demand any woman they want in obedience—it would be wrong to say the Law of God—to the law of Carpocrates. I guess this sort of legislation Carpocrates must have established for the copulation of dogs, pigs, and goats.⁷

Hospitality is a Christian virtue. Providing a haven for heresy and immorality is not!

In perilous times, be careful who your church allows into your eldership and diaconate, your pulpit, your Bible study group, or who provides the materials that you use for teaching and training. The road to hell can be paved with PhDs, conference speakers, TikTokers, and celebrity pastors looking to make a quick buck or prey on the undiscerning. I've seen too many friends, parishioners, and students seduced by charlatans with a catchy turn of phrase, some very "original" ideas, and a sleek YouTube channel.

⁶ *Didache* 11.3–6, in Michael W. Holmes, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, 3rd ed. (Baker Academic, 2006).

⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis: Books 1–3*, trans. John Ferguson, *Fathers of the Church* 85 (Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 3.2.10.

How do I know if someone is a purveyor of pernicious heresy? This requires discernment, understanding the difference between error and idiosyncratic ideas, as well as how to read doctrine and people. Generally, the big red flags are:

1. Lack of credentials from trustworthy institutions

Credentials are no guarantee of orthodoxy and moral virtue, but having a driver's license is at least a starting point for letting someone drive your car. The same goes for a church or a program that you want to listen to.

2. Disparagement of history, tradition & major figures of church history

If someone throws shade at the "ecumenical creeds" because they are ecumenical, then they don't know what the word "ecumenical" even means, and they are trying to unhitch you from the ancient roots of the church's faith that is confessed around the world. Beware of a teacher who says, "All who came before me were thieves and robbers."

3. Claims to offer special insights into the Bible & theology that nobody else has ever seen before

Now, God always has new light to shine upon his Word. Archaeologists can dig up new artifacts and texts that give us fresh perspectives on something. And every now and then, somebody writes a groundbreaking book that changes the way we read Jesus's parables or understand Paul's purpose for writing Romans.

However, the claim to possess some esoteric interpretive insight—or insisting he or she has received a fresh revelation or word that contradicts the written Word—should trigger alarms on your heresy-o-meter.

4. A lack of humility when receiving criticism

When manipulative teachers with dubious doctrines are confronted for teaching error, they ordinarily respond in classic DARVO style:

1. Deny ("I never said that!")
2. Attack ("Well, you're a motherless goat, anyhow!")
3. Reverse victim ("I am being persecuted for telling the truth just like Jesus!")
4. Ostracize ("Hey, let's cast out that Jezebel/Ahab, and I ban you from even speaking to her/him!")

It happens like clockwork!

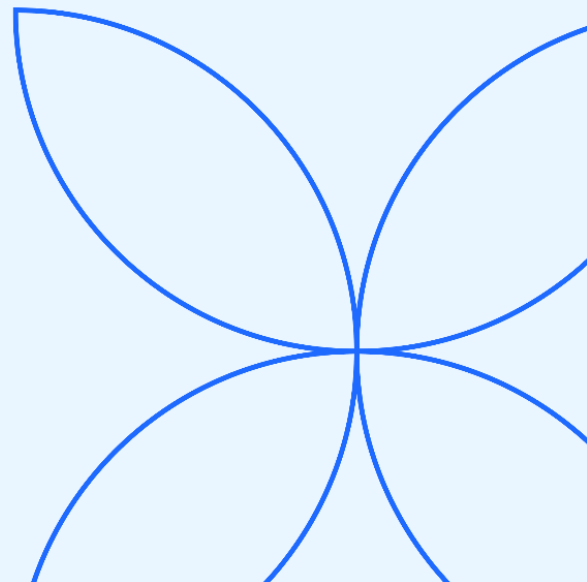
5. An unhealthy interest in status, media & money

Bad teachers are often very good at courting followers, fans, and fanatics, and they milk them for every penny. So they will naturally be aiming for a big stage, a big platform, a big fanbase, to spread their message and monetize it as soon as possible.

6. Hypocrisy

Heretics are generally not holy people. They can be Christian enough to fool people for a while, say the right things, be repulsed by the wrong things, and so on. But at some point, either in their anger, ego, greed, lust, or quest for glory, they will be known by their fruit. Every. Single. Time.

Remember the Apostolic Testimony to Jesus



Dear friends, remember the words proclaimed beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Jude 1:17)

The way to contend for the faith (v. 3) and to avoid false teachers (v. 4) is to commit oneself to the apostolic proclamation of Jesus.

I would argue that the antidote to much error is clinging to the apostles' own example of preaching and teaching, prayer and praise, worship and earthly labors.

The church is built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles (Eph 2:20), so it falls upon us to remain careful custodians of the Scriptures and the deposit of teaching that has been passed onto us.

We should remember their words (1 Thess 4:2, 8), their witness (Acts 1:22; 2:32; 5:32; 10:39–41), their warnings (Acts 2:40; 1 Thess 4:6; Heb 12:25; Jude 18), their wisdom (Acts 6:3; Eph 1:17; Jas 3:17), and their way of life in Christ (1 Cor 4:17).

The apostolicity of the church is—for Protestants—not an unbroken chain of oral teaching and ordination going back to Peter, but the ability of the church to keep bringing itself back, time and again, to the apostolic gospel.

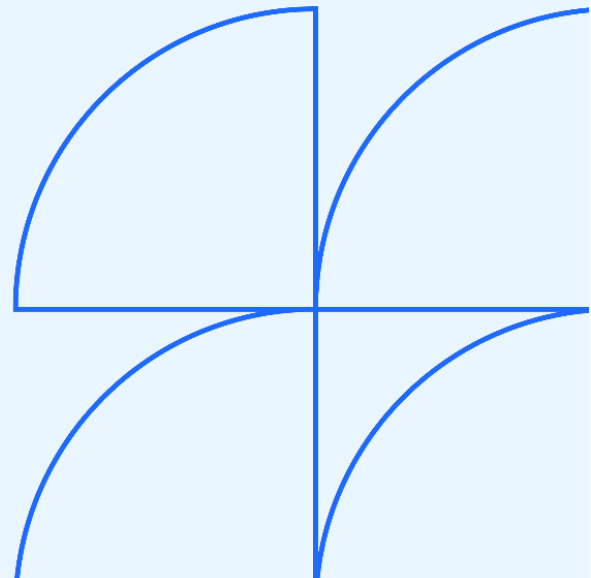
The primary framework we use for understanding Scripture is not philosophy, comparative religion, esoteric mythology, or the inventions and musings of some guru with his or her own following. To the contrary, the framework for understanding Scripture is the apostolic summary of the story of Scripture, the *regula fidei* ("rule of faith"), which tells us that we understand Jesus and ourselves as part of a story that runs creation, fall, patriarchs, Israel, Jesus, church, and consummation.

While the apostolic generation gave us the biblical canon, they also bequeathed to us the interpretive tools for understanding how the Bible fits together and how it climaxes in Jesus.

In perilous times, remember the testament of the apostles, their teaching, their faith, and their testimony. Our faith is apostolic, not generated by AI, nor based on the latest thing blowing in on the cultural breeze. As Jaroslav Pelikan once said, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead," not "the dead faith of the living."⁸ Tradition—by which I mean the apostolic tradition—is the fire that is shared from one generation to the next. Our job is to keep the fires of faith burning even when cold and frosty winds attempt to extinguish them.

⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (Yale University Press, 1984), 65.

Keep Yourself in the Love of God



But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith, by praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life. (Jude 1:20–21)

Jude's epistle is not a festival of heresy hunting, nor is it narrowly focused on tearing down the authors of the latest doctrinal controversy. Jude is interested in building up the church, strengthening it, nourishing it, and making it healthy again.

It is not just a matter of knowing what you are against: You also need to know what you are *for*. Being fixated on heresy and error can itself be unhealthy. In the church's life, there has to be introspection, spiritual formation, resting in Jesus, and looking to God. Do not just evaluate others. Sometimes you need to have a serious and sober look at yourself.

Jude here sums up the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. On the one hand, Jude tells the church that they have been “kept [by God] for Jesus Christ” (v. 1). They ground their salvation in God's own calling of them and love for them that reaches and preserves them in Jesus. But on the other hand, in verse 21, he gives them the imperative “keep yourselves in the love of God,” which is to urge them to check whether they are maintaining their love for God, which is the most basic of all scriptural commands (Deut 6:5; Josh 22:5; Matt 22:7; 2 Thess 3:5). Salvation is then both gift and demand, received and appropriated, freely given and yet exercised in effort.

The way to keep oneself in the love of God is then expounded with three imperatival participles:

1. “*building yourselves up in your most holy faith*”

Each person is like a temple, a monument, an edifice, who needs to be edified, that is, built up in their faith. In practice, this means progress in the Christian life, growing in holiness, attending to Christlikeness, increasing in the knowledge of God, and exuding love for others. This happens when one is connected to the “most holy faith,” our “common salvation” and “the faith” delivered to the saints. Jude urges people to bind themselves to the very things these interlopers have abandoned, denied, or mocked.

2. “*praying in the Holy Spirit*”

Prayer is the succor of the soul as it seeks communion with God. Prayer lays forth our praise, confession, laments, needs, and concerns. Whereas the interlopers are devoid of spiritual vitality (v. 19), Jude calls on people to have their prayer life animated and energized by the

Spirit, for “we do not know how to pray as one ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with unexpressed groanings” (Rom 8:26).

3. “*looking forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ*”

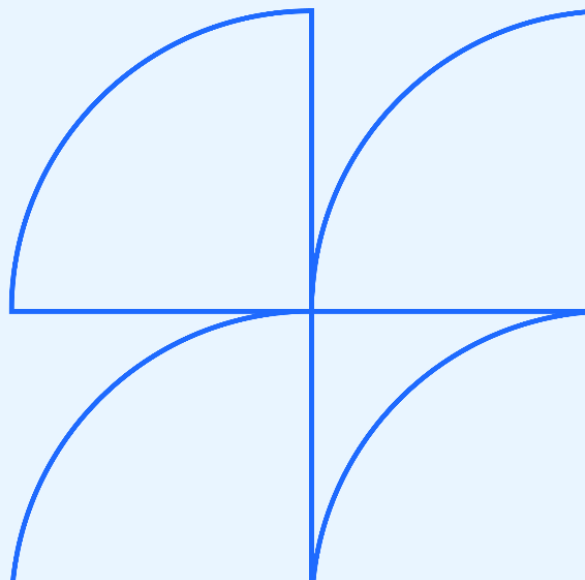
Christian faith is forward looking, awaiting the return of our Lord Jesus Christ to put all things to rights, for what awaits us at the end is God’s mercy. The Greek word *eleos* (ἔλεος) refers to “kindness or concern expressed for someone in need, mercy, compassion, pity, clemency.” As Peter Davids comments: “Mercy is not something that we have already received, for the final judgment has not yet happened. But the image is that of coming before the lord one has faithfully served, confident that one will receive the reward that he has promised.”⁹

One attains “eternal life” (v. 21) by binding yourself to divine love, by earnest edification, in fervent prayer, and a resolute endurance.

In perilous times, it is not enough to denounce and deconstruct error. There is the positive task of cultivating habits of love, learning, prayer, and endurance.

⁹ Peter H. Davids, [*The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*](#) (Eerdmans, 2006), 98.

Be Merciful to Those Confused



And have mercy on those who doubt, and save others by snatching them from the fire, and have mercy on others with fear, hating even the tunic stained by the flesh. (Jude 1:23–24)

Conflict breeds confusion, and confusion can lead to doubt. Whether we are talking about debates over cultural issues, doctrinal error, or ethics, what often happens is that fads and factions within churches leave people feeling pushed and pulled in several directions all at once.

To make matters worse, in such times people may not be discerning enough to know right from the wrong. They may not be able to tell the truth from a half-truth or grapple a certain problem at the level of complexity it demands. They might struggle to understand how to traverse a difficult subject with wisdom and gentleness. The result can be that some people no longer know what to believe. They might even be led to a point where they wonder if they still believe.

Nobody changes their mind for the better by condescending contempt, mockery, ridicule, or being treated as a pariah. If someone has a question, feels the pull of a certain fad, fake-gospel, or false doctrine, or is just plain confused in their own mind, they do not need a rebuke so much as redirection and reassurance in the most holy faith. As Michael Green notes,

A man [or woman] who is flirting with false teaching is not to be "sent to Coventry" by his Christian friends; they must have him in for coffee and chat it over with him in love. And they must know the faith so well that they can convince him while he is still hesitating.¹⁰

People who have a muddled understanding of something from some podcast they listened to or some TikTok reel they saw need mercy, not a finger wag and a lecture about how you are “not angry, just disappointed.” Talk them back from the cliff, snatch them from the fire, save them from the Kool-Aid.

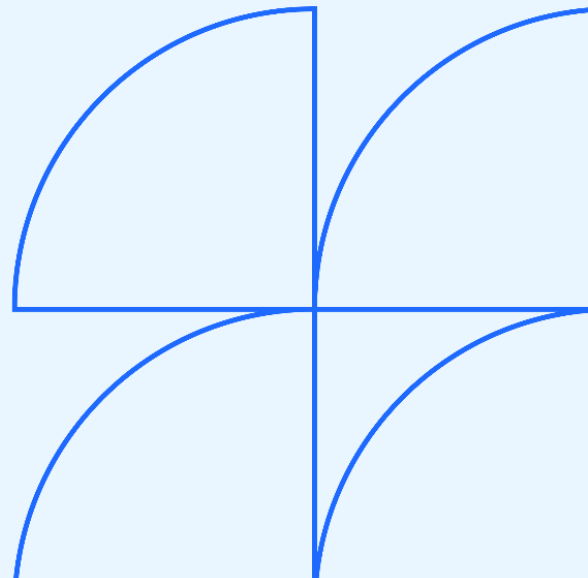
Above all, explain things to them with gentleness and a humble heart that Jesus and their most holy faith is far better and infinitely healthier for them than the latest religious snake oil, and far wiser than all the philosophies of men. This is not a psychological tactic to win them over to your view of things. It emerges from a sincere belief that the gospel is *good news*. It is *good* for you, and *good things* flow from it. If persons who are in doubt or wavering on the

¹⁰ Michael Green, [*2 Peter and Jude: An Introduction and Commentary*](#) (InterVarsity Press, 1987), 215–16.

borders of belief and unbelief realize that God is good and his Word is good, then they are likely to commit themselves and trust in the God who is the source of all good things.

Perilous times call for pastoral care and pastoral persuasion for those flirting with error or wrestling with doubt.

Seek God's Glory



Now to the one who is able to protect you from stumbling and make you to stand before his glory blameless with exultation, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority before all time and now and for all eternity. Amen. (Jude 1:24–25)

While the epistle of Jude is little known and much neglected, thankfully his doxology at the end of the epistle is widely used, as it is often sung as a benediction at the end of church services—and rightly so!

Jude closes his letter with a reminder, a reassurance: God was, is, and will be our Savior. God can protect us and preserve us from any error and even from our own failures. For that reason, we can offer to God through Jesus Christ the anthem of praise.

Here I must defer to the wonderful conclusion of Dick Lucas and Chris Green:

This wonderful heaping up of praise is due to God for one great reason, the reason that has shone through Jude's letter from start to finish, and the only beam of bright light that can offer any glimmer of hope to those who live in a world with a grim present and an even grimmer future under God's judgment. The reason is that he is the only God our Saviour. He is the only God there is, which rules out the delusions that Jude's opponents were spreading. In addition, he acts towards us as Saviour. It is such a small word, and has been so abused and trivialized in much Christian thinking and praise. But when the mighty day of God comes, more terrible than we can imagine—when we see for the first time who it is we rebel against; how perfect his standards are; how ghastly our sin is; how seriously he meant all the Old Testament warnings of judgment on the grumbling Israelites, the mutinous angels, and Sodom and Gomorrah—then we shall see with fear and wonder what a mighty work the cross of Christ was, and is, and shall be for ever.¹¹

In perilous times, lean into God's mercy, trust that God is truly for us, and ascribe glory, majesty, power, and authority to the one God who is mighty to save!

I wake up every day and watch the news over a bowl of fruit and porridge, and every day I realize that the world is still a perilous place. I check my social media feeds and emails, and I'm confronted with yet more evidence that many parts of the church are in peril for all sorts of reasons: laws, heresy, seductive fads, lack of courage, flexible morals, and so forth. But I get up, get dressed, and head out ready to face a new day of contending for the faith, speaking the truth in love, making disciples, showing mercy to sceptics, seekers, doubters, and disputers. Whatever things I'm vexed by, today or tomorrow, I remember that God is bigger and mightier

¹¹ Richard C. Lucas and Christopher Green, [*The Message of 2 Peter and Jude: The Promise of His Coming*](#) (InterVarsity Press, 1995), 234.

than all of them. I take solace in knowing that neither hell nor hyperlinks will stop God from building his church. In the end, no matter how perilous or precarious my part of the world is, I know that God loves me, Christ is for me, and the Spirit is with me. So I'm going to defend my church, my college, my part of the wall on the castle of our most holy faith from the zombies of heresy—and whatever fireballs of insanity that get thrown my way.

Recommended Reading

Bird, Michael F., and N. T. Wright. *The New Testament in its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians*. SPCK, 2019.

Danker, Frederick William, and Walter Bauer. [*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*](#). 3rd ed. University of Chicago Press, 2000.

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