

## Hold fast! - a one-off study for small groups

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Have you ever stopped to think about how beliefs and opinions change with the passage of time? Consider the claims of the Flat Earth Society at [http://www.alaska.net/~clund/e\\_djublonskopf/Flatearthsociety.htm](http://www.alaska.net/~clund/e_djublonskopf/Flatearthsociety.htm) Few of us would want to join up to this society, but what other major beliefs of yesteryear have been virtually entirely renounced, and what things have members of the group changed their beliefs or opinions about during their own lifetimes?

The beliefs of Christians, and the teachings of churches have changed down through the years as well. Some groups found justification in the Old Testament for black and coloured ethnic groups to be treated as second class citizens; many Christians shunned flight in aircraft in the early days because they believed that the earth was mankind's domain and the 'heavens' were God's; churches 75 years ago taught of the evil of the cinema industry (they might have better justification today!) because mankind was creating and worshipping 'graven images'. These teachings all seem to have disappeared, and this inevitably prompts the question: when is it alright to change beliefs and when isn't it? Is there an absolute in Bible teaching from which we must not depart?

We are going to look at the book of Jude, last but one book in the New Testament. This book and the book of James were written, it is believed, by brothers of Jesus who were not among the original 12 disciples because they did not believe in Jesus at first. Someone has said that James wrote his book to make clear that you can tell who is a real Christian by his Christian lifestyle while his brother Jude wrote to make clear that you can tell who is not a real Christian by his lack of Christian lifestyle.

*Read Jude 1-25.* Jude urges his readers, and this word should impact us as well in this generation, 'to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.' (v3). There are four statements worth making and exploring at this point:

**There is a faith 'once for all delivered to the saints'**. We often consider the teachings of cults and of other religions, but even they are under the same pressure as we are to maintain a distinctive. There are two enormous forces at work to rob us of the uniqueness of the Christian Gospel:

- **Relativism.** There lots of relativist theories but they all assert that one thing (e.g. moral values, beauty, knowledge, taste, or meaning) is relative to some particular framework or standpoint (e.g. the individual subject, a culture, an era, a language, or a conceptual scheme) and they all deny that any standpoint is uniquely privileged over all others. We see today in the western world very little attempt to interfere with freedom of faith because validity is attached to anyone's beliefs, but we see a tidal wave of opposition to any attempt to press one's beliefs onto others, or to any attempts to discredit other people's faith or viewpoints. How do we feel about this position as Christians?
- **Syncretism.** The dictionary defines this as 'the combination of different forms of belief or practice'. Syncretism looks for common ground between Christian denominations, and between religions. Ultimately, the merging of entirely different sets of beliefs is in view. In one sense there is nothing new in this. The gospel arose in one cultural context and is preached by us in the UK in an entirely different one. The missionary contextualises the gospel to adapt to yet another culture. There are degrees of syncretism which have been evident for political, social, religious or economic reasons wherever this process has taken place. Sometimes this is no more than an adjustment to cultural demands over clothing, or food or social protocol. At other times there has been a frank inclusion of other religious beliefs into the Christian faith as has sometimes happened in third world countries where animist (spiritist practices like the witchdoctor's) beliefs have been accommodated rather than rejected absolutely.

As evangelical Christians it is important for us to have a clear idea of the Biblical basis for our faith and to earnestly strive to prevent it being undermined. The ‘Apostles’ Creed’ served this precise purpose when faced with the error of denial of the deity of Jesus Christ by those who gave rise to movements like the Jehovah’s Witnesses. At ‘Ebe’ we have a broad statement of faith that members are invited to agree:

- (1) We believe in the Bible as the word of God and as the ultimate authority in all matters of faith and conduct.
- (2) We believe in the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Godhead, to whom equal honour is due.
- (3) We believe that as a consequence of the fall we are members of a fallen race and come under God's condemnation of sin.
- (4) We believe in Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God, who died on the cross in our place; rising from the dead redeemed us from the grip and penalty of sin.
- (5) We believe that through faith in Jesus alone we obtain the forgiveness of sins and are given eternal life.
- (6) We believe in the necessity of the Holy Spirit for new birth and for the power to live as Jesus' followers.
- (7) We believe that one day Jesus will return personally to establish His kingdom for ever.

**This faith is worth contending for.** History is littered with instances of Christians being prepared to die for their faith. Countries have gone to war in the name of their religion. A generation ago not much of this was being observed: it seemed to be part of a bygone age. Today however there are perhaps more martyrs for the Christian faith than in most previous generations. 400 million Christians live in the 74 nations identified in July 2001 (*Open Doors*) as engaging in persecution of religious believers, especially Christians. Muslim and Marxist states are the worst offenders. With the rise of radical Islam, those prepared to fight for their religion dominate every news broadcast. As evangelical Christians, we need to ask ourselves why is our faith worth contending for? Here are some possible answers. Can you add to the list?

- Because the Bible instructs us to do so and out of love for the Lord Jesus. (v3; Mt 28:18-20; 2 Cor 5:20)
- Out of concern for the lost (Ez 3:16-18)
- For the reward of knowing that we are doing his will (1 Thess 2:19)

**This faith is repeatedly threatened from within the church.** It is not just from outside of the church that attack can come, but attack from within can be even more destructive. While we prefer to talk about ‘differences of interpretation’ or about ‘alternative lifestyle choices’ for Jude there is simply right or wrong, truth and error. Jude advises his readers to look for certain character traits among those who might introduce error into the church. Such traits as these have often been seen in those who have splintered away from the true church and started sects at one time and another. These traits are:

- Unrighteousness highlighted as the way of Cain – a way of life characterised by things like selfishness, hatred and murder (Gen 4:3-4)
- Balaam’s error – the love of money (2 Pe 2:15)
- Korah’s rebellion – rising up against God’s appointed leadership (Num 16)..

**Every genuine believer should contend for the faith.** What are you and I doing to contend for the faith in our world, in our church and among our circle of acquaintance? Make a list below of some things we could commit to which would make a difference:

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