

The Book of Jude: Threats to the Church

By Martin Pickup

Noted for its forceful brevity, the letter of Jude is an urgent warning about the infiltration of false teachers among the Lord's people. The author identifies himself simply as "Jude, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James." He is most likely the half-brother of Jesus who is mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels along with James and other siblings (e.g., Matt. 13:55).¹ Though Jesus' fleshly brothers did not believe in Him during His earthly ministry, they became strong disciples after His resurrection. James became a leader in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13-21; 1 Cor. 15:7), and Jude became a leading figure as well, as indicated by this letter and some of the patristic writings.² We have no way of knowing when Jude wrote this letter, but based upon its abundant allusions to Old Testament history and Jewish tradition, his audience appears to be a Jewish Christian community that was probably located outside of Palestine.³

Though originally intending to write these brethren a more general message of encouragement, Jude felt compelled to narrow his subject matter and address the emerging threat of false teachers who had "crept in unnoticed" (vv. 3-4). As he begins the body of his letter, he warns his readers of these "ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ" (v. 4). The certainty of their future judgment is demonstrated by God's past judgments upon the exodus-generation of Israel, the rebellious angels, and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (vv. 5-7). They are likewise arrogant persons who appeal to false revelations as they reject authority and revile angelic

majesties (vv. 8-9). Though passing themselves off as Christians, their lifestyles are base and worldly. Jude compares them to three infamous sinners of old—Cain, Balaam, and Korah—and with stinging epithets and graphic imagery he describes the threat of their wanton ways. They are “unreasoning animals,” “hidden reefs,” “autumn trees without fruit” and “wild waves of the sea.” The divine judgment foretold by Enoch will be their fate (vv. 10-16). Jude concludes his diatribe with a reminder of how his audience already had been warned by the Lord’s apostles about ungodly persons like these who would mock God’s authority in the last days. Christians must therefore be circumspect in how they deal with persons who are influenced by such carnality (vv. 17-25).

Even a cursory reading of Jude reveals how similar its content is to 2 Peter 2:1 – 3:4. Though not identical, both documents describe false teachers in similar ways, appeal to similar Old Testament incidents, and cite the same apostolic warning about end-time “mockers” of God’s judgment who will “follow after their own lusts” (2 Pet 3:3; Jude 18). It seems that one author borrowed from, or at least was highly influenced by, the work of the other.⁴

The False Teachers in Jude

Jude is clearly concerned about certain persons whom he knew already had entered the ranks of the Christian community. His depiction of these false teachers—though specific in terms of the danger they posed and the judgment awaiting them—is nevertheless vague as to the doctrines they may have espoused. Even Jude’s most explicit statement about their views—that they “turn the grace of our God into licentiousness” and “deny our only Master and Lord”—probably refers not to the content of their words so much as the end result. By dismissing the idea that divine wrath would come upon them for their immoral lifestyle, these

persons had effectively turned God's gracious nature into an excuse for acting immorally, thereby denying the authority of Christ.

Jude's lack of specificity regarding the doctrines of these false brethren has prevented historians from identifying the group of people whom Jude has in view.⁵ It may even be a mistake for us to assume that a formal, organized group is under discussion at all, or that Jude intends his descriptions of false teachers to characterize only those particular persons who had recently appeared on the scene. The apostles of Jesus had previously warned about false teachers arising during the last days (Jude 17-18). The Lord himself issued such warnings during His earthly ministry, and He seemed to imply that apostates and false teachers should be expected until the time of His return (Matt 24:10-12, 23-25).⁶ It may be, therefore, that Jude's portrayal of false teachers in this letter is intentionally generic or stereotypical to some degree. Having been prompted to write this letter because of an initial emergence of false brethren within the Church, Jude may be using a broad brush to paint the full range of traits that such carnally-minded persons might potentially display. In this way, his words of warning would be as applicable and far-reaching as possible.

Regardless of what Jude's discussion of false teachers may or may not tell us about the false teachers of his day, it is important to realize that his words nevertheless fit, to a large extent, those persons of any time period who advocate a departure from the doctrine of the Lord. For example, whenever we choose to disregard any teaching of Jesus or His apostles, we have effectively "denied our only Lord and Master." As Paul said, many people "profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him" (Ti. 1:16). If a Christian begins to think that he can willfully sin without fear of divine judgment, or if he is motivated to go ahead and sin because

he thinks he can always ask for forgiveness later, then he has “turned the grace of God into licentiousness.” Because God’s gospel is a gospel of grace, it has always been easily twisted in this way by persons bent upon sinful living, even as Paul and Peter warned their readers (Rom 3:8; 6:1-2; 2 Pet 3:15-16). When we look at the letter of Jude, therefore, we need to see it ultimately as a universal warning to anyone, of any generation, who departs from the doctrinal and moral standard that our Lord has imposed.

We dare not overlook this fact today. Jude’s description of false teachers is so scathing and harsh that we may tend to dismiss his warning as having no potential application to ourselves. We may think he is talking only about persons who are “*really* sinful.” We need to realize that the false teachers of the first century probably would not have seen themselves in Jude’s words either. But that may be the very danger about which Jude is so concerned—the idea that our claim to be a Christian is good enough, or that doctrinal or moral laxity is no cause for alarm. We must also not presume that Jude’s warning about false teachers refers *only* to those persons who are formal preachers in a congregation or those who instruct an assembled group of people. Jude says that the false teachers “crept in unnoticed” (v. 4). Private conversations where false ideas are bandied about and encouraged can be a most effective way for error to be passed along from person to person. Many a congregation has been corrupted without a false teacher ever setting foot in a pulpit.

Modern Threats

Jude tells his readers to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (v. 3). Any departure from the faith that was revealed by the first-century apostles is dangerous and needs to be combated, yet certain errors may be especially

prominent and threatening at a given point in history. With that in mind, let me mention what I believe to be some of the most dangerous threats confronting us in our current era.

The Internet and Modern Communication. Modern technology has created the opportunity for instant communication and access to information unlike the world has ever seen. The benefit of this technology for spreading the gospel and creating a means of interaction between people is profound. But it has also created a host of problems. The easy access of information via the Internet means that religious error is only a mouse-click away. Jude warned his readers of false brethren who had “crept in unnoticed,” but he never dreamed of the kind of secretive infiltration of people’s minds that can happen by means of modern communication. People today tend to get their information on almost any subject—including the Bible—not from studying books, but from doing online searches. Much of the information about the Bible that one derives from Internet sources is tainted with error, and most people are not in a position to be able to distinguish the good information from the bad.

In addition, the Internet, television and cell phones have given people the means to easily access sexually explicit material that corrupts people minds and hearts. In past years, people had to go out in public to obtain pornography, and the fear of being seen helped serve as a deterrent. But now the basest and most addictive of pornographic materials is readily available inside our own homes. Over 42% of all Internet users visit pornographic websites, and ten percent spend as many as 11 hours each week doing so. The largest consumer of Internet pornography is the 35-49 year age group, while ninety percent of children ages 8-16 have viewed pornography online—most while doing homework!⁷ Parents are grossly irresponsible if they do not personally monitor their child’s computer usage. In my opinion, any computer user

today—whether young or old—is being morally irresponsible if he does not have filtering software installed on his computer that blocks adult-oriented material.⁸

In addition, we need to be on guard against the negative aspects of cell phones and social-networking services like Facebook. Psychologists point out that communication via texting and on-line chatting tends to diminish the normal inhibitions that people have when communicating with others face to face, and as a result they feel freer to comment on intimate or sexual things.⁹ Although Facebook is a marvelous new tool for social interaction, it has created the opportunity for emotionally vulnerable people to reconnect with past loves and establish secret relationships. A recent survey of divorce attorneys indicated that Facebook plays a key factor in about twenty percent of all divorces. As one expert puts it, Facebook is simply “a tool for an affair.”¹⁰

Theological Liberalism and the Academic Study of Scripture. There was a time in our country when anti-supernatural views of Scripture that denied its inspiration and authority were discussed, for the most part, only in the halls of academia. People in the pew were not confronted by such issues and they rarely came up in Bible studies with potential converts. Preachers therefore did not need to be particularly well-versed in such matters. That is no longer true. Liberal scholars and theologians hold the leading positions in nearly all major university theology departments today and they are the “authorities” whose “expert opinions” on the Bible are cited in television documentaries, magazines and online articles. The accessibility of information on the Internet means that liberal ideas are readily available to anyone, particularly to younger people who surf the web and take courses on religion at their local universities. Perhaps more than ever before, the average Christian today is confronted

with tough questions about canonicity, inspiration, inerrancy, Christian evidences, theodicy, hermeneutics, and many other academic subjects—and they need solid answers.

Our book of Jude provides a case in point. Anyone accessing Internet articles on Jude will quickly learn that many scholars today deny its authenticity and claim that it is a pseudonymous work, written by an unknown writer under the guise of Jude. The book also appears to cite noncanonical Jewish writings—viz., 1 Enoch and The Assumption of Moses (vv. 9, 14-15). So what will the average local preacher say to a young college student who, having learned about such issues, asks his preacher, “How do we know Jude is not pseudonymous? And why don’t we have 1 Enoch in our Bibles if Jude used it?”

I’m afraid that many preachers would not even be aware of these matters, much less be able to give an adequate response. Some might simply dismiss it all as “a worldly attack on Scripture,” and issue a rebuke to the young person for asking such questions. The fact is, however, that these are valid questions that Christians of the early centuries also asked about the book of Jude. Good answers are available.¹¹ But my point is that most of today’s preachers, Bible class teachers, and elders are ill-equipped to deal with such matters and, as a result, church members will seek answers by default from the Internet and other sources that tend to approach these issues with a liberal, anti-supernatural bias. I believe that in our day it is vital for any preacher or adult Bible-class teacher to have at least a basic knowledge of the academic issues that surround each of the books of the Bible. I recommend that brethren begin by reading conservative introductions to the New Testament and Old Testament, some good (up-to-date) Bible encyclopedia articles, as well as introductory works on Christian evidences.¹²

Denominationalism and a Lack of Restoration Spirit. Denominationalism and its false teachings have long been a problem for the Lord's people, but the climate of our day creates special dangers. People today do not like confrontation, and toleration is the watchword of our culture. Brethren seem far more willing to read denominational literature, while having less ability to sift the wheat from the chaff. There seems to be less Bible knowledge among us and more toleration of denominational error regarding such things as proper worship, the requirements of salvation, or the organization of the Church. We want to be accepted by our religious neighbors, not correct them.

One of the areas where denominationalism shows its influence upon us is in a growing conception many brethren have about the work of the Holy Spirit. When Scripture speaks about the indwelling of the Spirit in a Christian, it typically uses this terminology in discussions about moral behavior where the contextual issue has to do with what spirit one allows to direct his life—the Spirit of God or the spirit of sin (e.g., Rom. 6 – 8; James 4:5; 1 Cor. 6:19). But many people misconstrue such passages to be promising that the indwelling Spirit of God will communicate in some way to a Christian—either by thoughts in his head or a feeling he can sense. This conception is extremely dangerous because it shifts the standard of authority from the apostolic instruction in God's word to the thoughts in one's own mind. "I know God is with me," someone says, "because of what I feel in my heart," or "I think God is telling me to do such-and-such." Related to this subjectivism is another prevalent problem: that of confusing spirituality with emotion. Many people perceive spirituality as having more to do with how a person feels about God or their level of excitement during worship than with how obedient they are to God's word. Far from being biblical, these erroneous concepts readily fit in with

Jude's description of those who depart from the apostolic teaching and rely instead upon their own dreams and desires (v. 8).

Contributing to the above problems is, in my judgment, the widespread absence of a restoration spirit among brethren today. Sometimes this is due to the claim that we cannot reproduce apostolic Christianity. The New Testament writings are said to be insufficient for that purpose, and our hermeneutic passé. This kind of thinking sees restoration as impossible or unnecessary.

But an opposite mode of thought produces the same result. It is the idea that restoration is unnecessary because it already has been accomplished. Many brethren seem to have the idea that *we*—i.e., “the Churches of Christ”—have sufficiently restored first-century Christianity. We have a mental list of distinguishing doctrines and practices—an unwritten creed—and now the goal is simply to preserve them. Error is identified not on the basis of Scripture, but on the basis of whether a given matter comports with our current practices and traditional interpretations. I am not saying that this mindset is verbalized, or that it is even held consciously. But I believe its presence is evident if we will open our eyes. We see it whenever a previously unknown interpretation of a passage or a more expedient way of carrying out apostolic worship is prejudged to be “unscriptural” simply on the grounds of its novelty among us, and not from a study of Scripture. We see it whenever well-known Bible verses become mere proof-texts and cease being read in historical and cultural context. We see it when our concept of the Lord's Church is that of a party, a collection of congregations we call “the Churches of Christ,” with their historically agreed-upon positions. This kind of thinking is as denominational as it can be, and it snuffs out a restoration spirit.

The warning that Jude issued centuries ago calls out to us today, urging us to take heed before it is too late. We must remember that the Lord is our Master, not human tradition and not our subjective experience. The teaching of His apostles is “the faith once for all handed down to the saints.” I pray that we contend for that faith earnestly.

¹ The Greek name *Ioudas* can be rendered in English as either “Jude” or “Judas.”

² See Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* III.19-20 and his citation of Hegesippus, a 2nd century Christian writer.

³ The fact that the document was written in Greek, rather than Aramaic, suggests that its audience lived outside of Palestine. Whether scholars date the letter very early (in the 50’s), very late (in the 80’s, 90’s or beyond), or somewhere in between (in the 60’s or 70’s) depends upon their presumptions about several matters—e.g., the precise literary relationship between Jude and 2 Peter, the authenticity of both epistles, and the ethnic makeup and location of Jude’s audience.

⁴ Most modern scholars believe that the author of 2 Peter borrowed material from the book of Jude. But this view is largely an offshoot of the idea that 2 Peter is a pseudonymous writing, not actually written by the apostle Peter. (See note 11 below.) But it is just as possible that Jude borrowed from 2 Peter. One must also reckon with the possibility that no formal literary dependence exists between the two documents, but that their similarity of content reflects the closeness of the two authors who worked together for years in preaching similar sermons that warned of false teachers and judgment to come.

⁵ The antinomianism of Jude’s false teachers suggests to many scholars that they were a kind of early gnostic group, or in some way part of the Gentile insurgence into the Church. But the wantonness Jude describes could apply just as well to those of a Jewish background. The letter simply does not give enough information to determine what particular people Jude may have had in mind.

⁶ Paul does this as well in his description of “the last days” in 2 Tim. 3:1-9.

⁷ See http://www.familysafemedia.com/pornography_statistics.html.

⁸ No filtering software can block all sexually explicit materials. But for suggestions regarding reasonably-priced blocking software, go to <http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/index.html>.

⁹ Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as the *disinhibition effect*. See John Suler, “The Online Disinhibition Effect,” *CyberPsychology and Behavior* 7, No. 3 (2004), 321-326.

¹⁰ Article on CNN website, July 14, 2010. See <http://articles.cnn.com/2010-07-14/tech/facebook.cheating>.

¹¹ Proponents of Jude’s pseudonymity have difficulty explaining, among other things, (1) what motive a pseudonymous author would have for producing this document, (2) why he would write in the name of Jude rather than a more prominent apostolic figure, and (3) why he would use a letter format when pseudonymous literature of this period was in the form of gospels and apocalypses. In regard to Jude’s apparent use of noncanonical materials, there is no reason to think that he cites 1 Enoch or The Assumption of Moses as if they were Scripture. He may not even be citing these documents at all, for it is quite possible that Jude and the authors of 1 Enoch and The Assumption were all making use of the same traditional oral material. See M. Pickup, “The Canonicity of 2 Peter and Jude,” 2000 Florida College Lectures (Puckett Auditorium); audio tapes are available at the Florida College Bookstore. See also D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 690-695.

¹² The following works are a good place to start: D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the*

Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992); Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993); William Lane Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010).