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“Keep Yourselves in the Love of God”

An Interpretation of Jude 20, 21

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THE Letter of Jude is one of the most polemical portions of the New Testament. The purpose of Jude, the brother of the Lord,¹ in writing this letter was to appeal to his readers “to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (v. 3).²

The passage with which this discussion deals is an earnest admonition to the Christians to whom Jude is writing to remain loyal to God. According to the R. S. V., Jude writes: “But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.” Unfortunately this translation obscures several important facts about this passage, and for that reason it is necessary to present a more literal translation: “But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.”

I

In order to understand this exhortation and to see the urgent need for it, it will be necessary to place these verses into their context and thereby to survey the situation which called forth the Letter of Jude.

Jude had been contemplating the composition of a letter to the congregation to which he now was writing; but the letter which

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he had been planning was to be of quite another sort than the one which he now was writing.³ The letter which Jude had been thinking of writing was to deal with the "common salvation" (v. 3) — the salvation in which he and his readers shared. As he was contemplating the writing of this letter, he received information which compelled him to change his plans. Instead of writing a letter in which he would give an exposition of Christian doctrine as he taught it, he now found it necessary to write a letter exhorting his readers "to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."

The development which had made it necessary for Jude to change his plans was the fact that libertine errorists had stealthily entered the congregation to which Jude had been planning to write.⁴ In the verses which follow, Jude, with a vehemence seldom equaled in the Scriptures, pictures these men. They were, says Jude, "written of beforehand unto this condemnation" (v. 4. A. S. V.). It seems likely that Jude is here referring to the description of the false teachers of the last days which is given in 2 Peter, though, in all honesty, it must be admitted that the priority of 2 Peter is subject to dispute.⁵ They are "ungodly persons who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness" and by their actions deny the lordship of Jesus Christ over their lives (v. 4). Besides, these men "in their dreamings defile the flesh" (v. 8), says Jude, with a reference to the sexual sins in which they indulge their carnal appetites. They have no respect whatsoever for human or divine authority (v. 8) and "revile the glorious ones," that is, the angels of God (v. 8), while not even the archangel Michael dared to utter a reviling judgment against the devil when he contended with the latter for possession of the body of Moses (v. 9). Jude also says that "they revile what they do not understand" and have sunk to the level of the irrational animals (v. 10). Jude then turns to the Old Testament for illustrations suitable for depicting these libertines: "They walk in the way of Cain," the murderer, destroying, not men's bodies, but what is far more precious, men's souls; "and abandon themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error," who for a price cursed God's chosen people; "and perish in Korah's rebellion," who rebelled against Moses' authority in the wilderness (v. 11). They defile the love feasts of the congregation as they

fare luxuriously, while the poorer members of the congregation must go hungry (v. 12). They were men of whom great things had been expected when they affiliated with the congregation, but, instead, they are like barren fruit trees in autumn, the very season when they should be bearing fruit; like rain clouds which do not pour down much-needed moisture upon the parched fields—an utter disappointment (v. 12)! They are like the waves of the sea, which cast up filthy scum upon the shore; they are like shooting stars doomed to the same perdition as that which has been prepared for the devil and his angels (v. 13, cf. v. 6). They are "grumblers, malcontents, following their own passions, loudmouthed boasters, flattering people to gain advantage" (v. 16). They are the ones who are disrupting the unity of the congregation (v. 19). They are worldly people who do not have the Spirit of God dwelling in them (v. 19). In short, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, they are no Christians.

II

Jude begins this portion of his letter by addressing his readers as "beloved." This is a form of address commonly employed by the writers of the New Testament letters, and it may be an indication of the manner in which Christians of the Apostolic age addressed one another. By using this word, Jude indicated his interest in, and his concern for, his readers, who were the faithful members of the congregation to which he was writing. As a comparison with v. 17 shows, Jude is also contrasting his feelings toward his readers with his attitude toward the libertines, who were deliberately trying to mislead these believers. Jude's love for his readers is an outgrowth of the love of God for him, which he now reflects in his concern for others (1 John 4:11).

As is indicated by the literal translation of these verses, Jude's chief concern is that his readers keep themselves in the love of God. In order to understand Jude's admonition, it is necessary to determine the meaning of the phrase "the love of God" in this passage. Is it man's love for God, or is it God's love for man, of which Jude is here speaking? According to the first interpretation, the genitive "of God" would be classified by the grammarians as an objective genitive; according to the second, as a subjective genitive.

The question cannot be settled by an appeal to any grammatical rule-of-thumb, for, as Moulton says, "in Greek this question is entirely one of exegesis, not of grammar."⁶ And yet, it is noteworthy that with a striking unanimity of opinion the commentators who were consulted in the preparation of this study all regard this as a subjective genitive.⁷ If so, the admonition may be paraphrased: "Do everything possible to keep yourselves in the realm of God's love for you."

The reason for this unanimity of exegetical opinion is not difficult to find; for, in accordance with the hermeneutical principle that an author is his own best interpreter, the commentators refer to vv. 1 and 2 of this letter, which read:

"Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James,

"To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ:

"May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you."

In these verses the love which is spoken of is obviously God's love for the recipients of this letter. In v. 1 the readers are called "beloved." This is not the same word which was employed by Jude in addressing his readers, about which comments already have been made; rather it is the perfect passive participle of the verb ἀγαπάω. Though the agent is not expressly mentioned, Lightfoot, in commenting on Col. 3:12, says that this word "seems to be used always of the objects of God's love."⁸ This would indicate, then, that God had showed His love to these people in the past, and that, as a result of that abiding love, they are now in fellowship with Him. The wording of the wish in v. 2 also indicates that the love there spoken of is God's love for men; for love in this verse is placed alongside of mercy and peace, which are clearly God's gifts to men in Christ. Another factor which merits consideration in this connection is the obvious parallelism of "love of God" with "mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ" in v. 21. In the latter phrase the genitive is plainly subjective, and the presupposition therefore is that the genitive in the phrase under discussion is also subjective. In view of these facts it is not at all surprising to discover that the great majority of commentators regard the "love of God" in this passage as God's love to men.

The love of God for men is the cause of the restoration of mankind to divine favor. The love of God cannot be separated from the person and work of Jesus Christ, who became man for the reconciliation of the world to God (Gal. 4:4 f.). The love of God was the cause of the Incarnation, in which God gave His Son into death for the sins of a hostile world (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8). The result of the love of God for men is the forgiveness of men's sins; and, as Paul says, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, which has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5), and thereby we are assured of God's favor.

When Jude here speaks of the love of God, he is not using the picture of an outpouring of the love of God into men's hearts; rather he regards this love as a realm in which men live. A man who is a Christian, who believes in Jesus Christ, who in faith accepts the forgiveness of his sins for Jesus' sake, is "in the love of God." Before his conversion he had been in another realm, the realm of God's wrath; but now, by the grace of God, he has been delivered from that realm and brought into the realm of God's love in Christ.

The status of the Christians to whom Jude addressed his letter was endangered by the libertine errorists whom he castigates in this letter. If these Christians follow the evil example set by these libertines, they place themselves once again outside of the realm of God's love and over into the realm of God's wrath.

This passage alone should be sufficient to indicate the wrongness of the teaching that if a man has once become a believing Christian, he always maintains his status as a Christian for the remainder of his life. But this passage does not stand alone in the Scriptures. The Lord Jesus, in the Parable of the Soils (Luke 8:4-15), indicates that there are those who for a time believe and then fall away. Paul, too, considers such a fall from God's grace a fearful possibility for his converts in the churches of Galatia. The entire letter to the Galatians is based on the premise that the Galatians may lose their standing in the realm of God's love.

As is indicated by the word order in the original, each Christian is to concern himself with this task of keeping himself in the realm of divine love. It is the task which God has set before him. But how shall he do it?

In the triad of participial phrases which surround the main exhortation, Jude indicates the steps which the Christians to whom he is writing should take in order to achieve this end.⁹ They are to build themselves up on their most holy faith; they are to pray in the Holy Spirit; they are to look for the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ.

III

The first suggestion for remaining in the love of God which Jude offers his readers is that they build themselves up on their most holy faith. Clearly Jude is using picture language in his advice to these Christians, but it is a picture which they will readily understand. The picture which Jude employs is that of the construction of a building, most likely a temple. The Christians are the stones; the foundation is their most holy faith; and the finished structure is the Church.

Jude's advice is intended for all of his readers. Each one of them is to be concerned about a place in the finished structure, for unless he has such a place, he is a castaway, a reject; or, to change the picture, he is outside the realm of God's love. It is in this sense that the statement is true: "Outside the Church there is no salvation."

There may be legitimate differences of exegetical opinion on the role which faith is to play in the erecting of this structure. Some commentators regard it as the element which unites the various building blocks into one structure; others, with equal justification, view it as the foundation upon which the structure is raised.¹⁰ Both views of the role of "the faith" make good sense and are grammatically tenable; and neither militates against the analogy of faith; and therefore either one may be adopted. The view which is taken in this article, as has already been indicated by the translation and by the comments which have already been given, is that "the faith" is the foundation upon which the building is set. The reason for reaching this decision is simply the parallelism in thought between this passage and 1 Cor. 3:10-14 and Eph. 2:20-22.

But what is "the faith" of which Jude is here speaking? Is it active trust and confidence in God and His promises? Or is it a body of belief? There are some commentators who understand "the faith" in this first sense. Such interpretation of the word "faith"

in this context encounters grave obstacles. In the immediate context, it may be noted that the adjective which is translated "most holy" is nowhere else used to modify the word "faith" when it is used in the sense of trust. Another forceful argument against the interpretation of "faith" in the subjective sense in this passage is Jude's use of the word in v. 3 of this letter, where he appeals to his readers "to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints." Quite plainly "the faith" must be the doctrines of faith, for only the doctrines of faith were delivered "once for all." To interpret "faith" in v. 3 of the act of faith would be to contradict the Biblical teaching that a man may fall from faith, or, that having fallen there still is an opportunity for him to repent and return to faith. On the basis of Jude's use of the word in v. 3, it seems necessary to understand "the faith" as the body of doctrine.

Jude's exhortation to his readers to build themselves up on their most holy faith is simply an exhortation to make use of the God-appointed means of grace. He is urging his readers to grow in the knowledge of God as He has revealed Himself in His Word. If they do that, they will be enabled to remain within the sphere of divine love in Christ.

The parallel to Eph. 2:20-22 and 1 Cor. 3:10-14 has already been noted. In the one passage the foundation of the structure is Jesus Christ; in the other, it is the Apostles and Prophets; and in the passage under discussion it is the "most holy faith." There is no contradiction between these passages; the seeming discrepancy is the result of differing points of view. In all cases Jesus Christ is the Foundation of the structure. In the passage from 1 Corinthians Paul clearly says this. In the passage from Ephesians Paul speaks of the Apostles and Prophets as the foundation of the structure. In this passage, however, he is not speaking of them as individuals, but is speaking of them according to their office, as inspired spokesmen for God. They are simply the men employed by Jesus Christ in the performance of His prophetic office while He is not visibly present in the world. The message which they bring is Christ Crucified. In the passage from Jude the "most holy faith" is the foundation. This faith is the Gospel message, which centers in Jesus and His work. Thus it becomes apparent that, in all cases, Jesus Christ is the Foundation of the structure.

This faith Jude terms "most holy." What may have prompted the choice of this adjective? There would seem to be an implied contrast in these words—a contrast between this faith, which comes from the Holy One of Israel, and the vile doctrines of the libertines. Jude also assures his readers that this faith belongs to them; it is "your most holy faith." They are among the saints to whom it had been delivered. There may also be found in these words a tactful exhortation to these faithful believers not to lose this faith, for if they do, they will no longer rightfully be able to claim it as their own, and they will be outside the realm of God's love.

When Jude pictures the Christians as the stones in a structure built upon the foundation of the faith, he is also implying that there is to be a true unity among them. This is to be a "unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). They are to be concerned about one another. In contrast to the libertines, who are schismatics (v. 19), true Christians such as they are should be concerned to strengthen and maintain their unity with one another. When they see one of their number imperiled by the errors of the libertines, they should be concerned to admonish and strengthen him. And they, in turn, should desire that their fellow Christians do the same for them. Such mutual concern will help to keep them in the love of God.

IV

In the second member of this triad of participial phrases, Jude urges his readers to pray in the Holy Spirit.¹¹ This is his second bit of advice to his readers on how they may remain inside the realm of God's love.

In v. 19 of this Letter Jude had described the libertines as men who are "devoid of the Spirit." While strong arguments may be advanced for understanding this phrase to mean that these men have no spiritual nature, that they are little better than beasts, the translation of the R. S. V. seems preferable. The Holy Spirit, who takes up His dwelling in the believer, is the Guarantee of the blessings of heaven (Eph. 1:14). His indwelling in the heart of a believer is proof that such a person is a child of God (Rom. 8:16), and a promise to that person that he will participate in the

joys of heaven. In describing the libertines as being "devoid of the Spirit," Jude is thereby denying their Christianity.

In contrast, the Christians to whom Jude is writing have the Spirit. It is this Spirit of God, dwelling in them, who is to aid them in offering their prayers. When they pray, the motive power behind their prayers should not be the "ego," but should be the Spirit of God, who dwells in them. Their prayers should be of all kinds: petitions, intercessions, thanksgivings, and ascriptions of praise to God, as the Spirit leads them. When they in their sinful weakness do not know how to pray as they ought, the Spirit of God will intercede for them "with sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). These prayers, which are offered at the direction of the Spirit, will also be in full accord with the will of God (Rom. 8:27).

Such prayer will draw these imperiled Christians closer to God and ever deeper into the realm of His love. It is in this way, then, by prayer inspired and guided by His Spirit, that they will keep themselves in the love of God. They will be led to ask for those things which are needful to their everlasting salvation.

V

Jude's final suggestion for remaining in the sphere of God's love is to look for the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ. The verb translated by "to look for" is often used by the New Testament writers in contexts where it points to the future. Thus, for example, Simeon was "looking for the Consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25), and Anna spoke of the child Jesus "to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38). In this passage, too, the verb has definite reference to the future. Christians may keep themselves in the love of God by "looking for the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Mercy is a word which is closely related in content to grace and love, which are its synonyms. However, the specific significance which attaches itself to mercy is the thought of pity on those who are in distress. This thought, coupled with an expectation for the future, can only point to the final Judgment.

For the unbelieving world the thought of a day of just retribution is terrifying, and by many it is ridiculed as a fable. For believers, on the other hand, it is an object of longing and desire,

for it is the day on which the Lord will show His pity to His people in distress. The believer is in a hostile world, for the world is under the domination of the prince of this world, the Christian's adversary, the devil. Therefore the world will show active hostility against the Christian. The Christian also has within himself a stronghold of the devil in his old nature. Accordingly, the struggle depicted in Romans 7 goes on within him. As he is attacked from within and without, he is in distress. He therefore longs for the day when the Lord will show him His mercy and take him out of this world and completely destroy the stronghold of Satan within him. Such an attitude of joyous expectation is in accord with Jesus' admonition to His disciples that when they see the signs of the end being fulfilled, they should look up and raise their heads because their redemption is drawing nigh (Luke 21:28).

This hope, of course, is to make a difference in the lives of Christians. Since they do not know when Jesus will appear in judgment, they must constantly be prepared to meet Him. They dare not allow themselves to be led astray by the errorists who have come into their midst; for, if they do, at that very moment Jesus may come, and they will be outside the realm of His love. Positively they will busy themselves with the serious task of Christian living, since it will be their earnest desire to be living in accordance with His will when He appears on the clouds of heaven. Inasmuch as only those who are Christians can please Him, such an expectation of the imminent end of all things will tend to keep them conscious of the necessity of remaining in the love of God.

VI

The goal at which Christians are to arrive by remaining in the love of God is eternal life.¹² Man was created for life, but by his rebellion man forfeited that life. Through the redemption God made it possible for men once again to enjoy that life. All those who are in the realm of God's love may look forward to the full experience of that life in eternity. But all those who are outside the realm of divine love may expect nothing but everlasting death. Accordingly, the goal at which Christians are to arrive by remaining in the love of God is eternal life, of sharing in the life of the eternal God to all eternity.

NOTES

¹ The author nowhere identifies himself as a brother of the Lord. In v. 1 he calls himself "brother of James," who is probably to be identified with the James whom Paul mentions in Gal. 1:19.

² Unless otherwise noted, all Biblical quotations are from the R. S. V.

³ Though the Letter is not addressed to any specific congregation, the situation with which it deals is so definite that it is difficult to escape the conclusion that this Letter was written to one specific local congregation.

⁴ Many commentators hold that the errorists combatted in this Letter are antinomian Gnostics. However, the arguments in favor of this view are not convincing, and therefore it is better to speak in a more general way.

⁵ For an able defense of the priority of 2 Peter see Charles Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* in the *International Critical Commentary*, pp. 216—224.

⁶ James Hope Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, Vol. 1, p. 72.

⁷ Bigg, *op. cit.*, says: "Some commentators take the words to mean 'love for God,' as in 2 Thess. iii. 5." Of the commentators that I have been able to consult, there is none who adopts this view.

⁸ J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, p. 219.

⁹ These participles would be called participles of means by the grammarians. See A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, p. 1128.

¹⁰ ἐποικοδομεῖν is followed by ἐπί c. dat. in Eph. 2:20; by ἐπί c. acc. in 1 Cor. 3:12; and here by the simple dat.

¹¹ It is possible to construe ἐν ἀγίῳ πνεύματι with "keep yourselves in the love of God," as Luther did; but the rhythm of the sentence favors joining it with "praying."

¹² εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον has been variously construed. Some commentators take it with τηρήσατε; others with προσδεχόμενοι τὸ ἔλεος. There is no way in which to arrive at a final decision. In any case, it expresses the goal which is to be reached by Christians.

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