

# Growing in Our Shared Faith



With the new year come renewed efforts toward health and growth, which require dedication and consistency. Sometimes we enlist the help of others to achieve these goals, like signing up for an exercise class. You know it's good for you, but you probably don't go thank the trainer after the first few sessions. I recognize that today's sermon is not one you are likely to come thank me for afterward. It is an introduction to a series and format we are not as accustomed to right now. Over the next year, we are going to be focusing on what we believe according to Scripture, as we have basically spelled out in our statement of faith.

# **Growing in Our Shared Faith**

## **Jude 3, 24-25; Ephesians 4:11-16**

For the past three elders' retreats, we have evaluated different aspects of our church's health in regard to spiritual fruit, spiritual disciplines, theological knowledge, relationships with others, evangelism and missions, and all other forms of obedience. Some of you may remember my poor attempt to draw a stick figure that had these areas of maturity in the faith correlate to different body parts.

You don't want to have a small heart with a big head. Nor do you want to exult in having a big heart and big arms but have a shrunken head and super tiny legs. You want to be healthy in all regards. While the elders noted that we are doing decently in all areas, this past retreat we felt that if we could grow in our beliefs about God, then it would propel us to greater faithfulness in all other areas.

As part of us standing firm on God our solid rock, we want to better know this rock upon whom we stand.

As we look at different theological claims according to our statement of faith, we will consider what, how, and why. What is the doctrinal belief we are discussing? How do we have this belief coming forth from Scripture? Why is it significant that we hold to this belief?

## **Jude 3**

**Dear friends, although I was eager to write you about the salvation we share, I found it necessary to write, appealing to you to contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all.**

We always have room to grow in all areas. But faith and truth are not matters that we should postpone in our process of maturity. Jude, the brother of James and half-brother of Jesus, wrote 3 Dear friends, although I was eager to write you about the salvation we share, I found it necessary to write, appealing to you to contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all.

When Jude first planned to write to the recipient church, he wanted to encourage them by speaking about the salvation they shared. But then he found out about the teachings and practices that were occurring among some influential people within the church. So he wrote that the church was to contend for the faith. David Peters points out that this word for contend was often associated with the stadium where fights were waged. The prize that we are to contend for is the faith handed down to the saints. This reference to faith is not just the personal trust of individuals in Christ, even though that is involved. Jude is focused on the objective beliefs of our shared faith, the good news about Jesus AND the beliefs supporting it that then determine how we are to feel and how we are to live.

The church must be both ministers and warriors. They must be both priests and gladiators. We must contend for the faith while applying its soothing medicine to ourselves, each other, and the world. It is only as we know the truth of God and speak it in love that we can serve Christ in these ways.

## **Ephesians 4**

**11 And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry,**

**to build up the body of Christ,  
13 until we all reach unity in the  
faith and in the knowledge of  
God's Son, growing into  
maturity with a stature  
measured by Christ's fullness.**

**14 Then we will no longer be  
little children, tossed by the  
waves and blown around by  
every wind of teaching, by  
human cunning with cleverness  
in the techniques of deceit.**

**15 But speaking the truth in  
love, let us grow in every way  
into him who is the head—  
Christ. 16 From him the whole  
body,**

**fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building itself up in love by the proper working of each individual part.**

# **Our theology is to be centered on the truth of the gospel of Christ and Scripture.**

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What is the truth Paul expects us to speak in love?

Paul writes elsewhere to Timothy and the church with him

13 Hold on to the pattern of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 14 Guard the good deposit through the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

We as the people of God are charged with keeping the good deposit of the gospel. You are part of a divine legacy. You are keepers of a truth that must be handed out. But as it is handed out it must be kept pure.

Currently first rounds of the Pfizer vaccine are being dispersed throughout the states, with the states getting to determine who is to receive the vaccines first. One of the difficulties with the vaccines is transporting it. The Pfizer vaccine must be kept between -112 and -76 degrees Fahrenheit. If the vaccine temperature gets outside of that range, the lipids that protect the genetic material in the vaccine would fail to keep the vaccine effective.

John Piper speaks of theology like a treasure chest. The treasure is what is important. The good news that God has achieved atonement by means of the Son's death and resurrection by the power of the Spirit, which is applied to all who believe is the treasure. But to transport this treasure, it must stay with the context of affirmed doctrine if we are to maintain its purity throughout our lives together within the church.

16 All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Scripture is true as God's very word. But Scripture itself tells us to speak it to one another. When we speak truth to one another, we are not just quoting Scripture to each other, even though you should quote Scripture. We are to use the truth of God's Word in wise application to our lives and with each other. We must learn to use what Scriptures in what contexts, learning how to teach, rebuke, correct, and train as the Bible expects.

Here's the catch, the moment that Scripture passes into you and through you to someone else, it is no longer within the context of Scripture. It is now your context. There is a distinction between Scripture and us. Scripture is itself God's Word. God is infallible and therefore His Word is. But we are fallible. So even if you quote a verse, you could quote it out of context and misrepresent the meaning of the verse. You are fallible. Scripture is infallible, but we are fallible. But still we must speak it.

Theology is our reflection upon God's self-revealed truth. Everyone does theology. It is a matter of whether you are doing it faithfully and humbly, if you are reflecting God's beauty in a holistic way as an act of worship, or if your theology is crumbling upon the basis of self-exaltation. We need accountability from others so that we are not isolated to our own preconceived notions. Thankfully, we have brothers and sisters throughout the ages who have wrestled with these same matters. We'll have support from theologians throughout the ages, from Baptists as well as those from other evangelical denominations. We can even learn from those outside of our evangelical camp, as long as we do so very carefully, avoiding swallowing any bones, as Guy Holloway likes to say it. To help us in this regard, we will use the BFM 2000, our church's statement of faith as a springboard to each Sunday's sermon subject, but it will only be a springboard to propel us to look at Scripture more deeply as the Spirit leads us to reflect upon God's self-revelation.

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Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would lead them into all truth. While this statement is especially focused on divine revelation with some of the apostles writing Scripture, it also speaks to the role of the Spirit to illuminate our minds to what is true.

As Gregory Thornbury points out, any attempt to speak about truth with confidence is a theological and religious statement. But it is only as the Transcendent Source of all truth reveals truth to us that we are able to have confidence our claims. And God has revealed Himself by His Word.

People are affected by sin in every aspect of our beings, so we are not awakened to God's basis and standard of truth unless God brings us into the light of truth, Christ Jesus according to the Word. It is only as God wakes us up and enlightens us to the truths of Scripture that we are able to embrace them as true.

1 Cor 2

12 Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who comes from God, so that we may understand what has been freely given to us by God. 13 We also speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual things to spiritual people. 14 But the person without the Spirit does not receive what comes from God's Spirit, because it is foolishness to him; he is not able to understand it since it is evaluated spiritually.

Right Theology is ultimately the work of the Spirit in us. It is to be an act of worshipful response by which we come to know God better by reflecting on His revelation of Himself as the Spirit guides us into this truth.

We must seek to reflect upon God's truth if we are to speak it faithfully within our culture. The preamble to the BFM 2000 speaks to the tradition of faithful Baptist churches attempting to speak God's truth in their context.

“Baptists are a people of deep beliefs and cherished doctrines. Throughout our history we have been a confessional people, adopting statements of faith as a witness to our beliefs and a pledge of our faithfulness to the doctrines revealed in Holy Scripture.

Our confessions of faith are rooted in historical precedent, as the church in every age has been called upon to define and defend its beliefs. Each generation of Christians bears the responsibility of guarding the treasury of truth that has been entrusted to us [2 Timothy 1:14]. Facing a new century, Southern Baptists must meet the demands and duties of the present hour.

New challenges to faith appear in every age. A pervasive anti-supernaturalism in the culture was answered by Southern Baptists in 1925, when the Baptist Faith and Message was first adopted by this Convention. In 1963, Southern Baptists responded to assaults upon the authority and truthfulness of the Bible by adopting revisions to the Baptist Faith and Message. The Convention added an article on “The Family” in 1998, thus answering cultural confusion with the clear teachings of Scripture. Now, faced with a culture hostile to the very notion of truth, this generation of Baptists must claim anew the eternal truths of the Christian faith.”

This practice of stating our faith, our shared beliefs, is not new. It has been occurring since the early second c.

But there are limits to statements of faith. The Preamble to our statement of faith adds these clarifying points:

■ (1) That they constitute a consensus of opinion of some Baptist body, large or small, for the general instruction and guidance of our own people and others concerning those articles of the Christian faith which are most surely held among us. They are not intended to add anything to the simple conditions of salvation revealed in the New Testament, viz. (namely), repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. (So, we dare not include in our evangelistic appeals, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and in the BFM 2000.” NO! But our beliefs should help safeguard the appeal to Jesus alone for salvation.)

■ (2) That we do not regard them as complete statements of our faith, having any quality of finality or infallibility. As in the past so in the future, Baptists should hold themselves free to revise their statements of faith as may seem to them wise and expedient at any time. (This statement is not nullifying the ongoing need for statements of faith. Rather, it is preparing you for seeing this BFM as very basic. Theology done well should always lead you to more questions, not just answers. As our God is infinite, so our pursuit of knowing and loving Him is without end. Statements of faith like the BFM helps us get started in a United way in this journey.....Do you know what the first president of our denomination said about statements of faith 175 years ago? He said we have no statement of faith but the Bible alone. Do you recognize what is problematic with that statement of faith he made? Exactly, in order to speak against having a statement of faith, he had to make a statement of faith. It is best that we have clear statements of faith that function as servants to Scripture and as tools to the church. Statements of faith help clarify but it never rule. God rules according to His Word.)

■ (3) That any group of Baptists, large or small, have the inherent right to draw up for themselves and publish to the world a confession of their faith whenever they may think it advisable to do so.

(So, we are encouraged to address our situations with a fresh look at God’s Word to apply it wisely to what is going on in our church or in our world. We must take responsibility for stating our beliefs.)

■ (4) That the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Confessions are only guides in interpretation, having no authority over the conscience.

(In a minute or so, you will hear me read about the role of our statement of faith for accountability. So, the committee that finalized this statement for Baptist churches is not saying it is powerless. This point is saying that the power of a confession of faith is found in how accurately it points to the Scriptures and their intended meaning and significance. If our theological claims are anchored to the Scripture consistently, then they maintain their power. If they have no connection to Scripture’s meaning and

significance, then they are but words of men. So do not put your confidence in theology but in the God our theology is to reflect and in His Word.)

(5) That they are statements of religious convictions, drawn from the Scriptures, and are not to be used to hamper freedom of thought or investigation in other realms of life.

(We need to understand the ranges and limits of each subject that theology addresses. This statement is not saying God is not over all aspects of life, but part of theology is understanding the range and limits of a particular theological consideration.)

The preamble add, "Baptists cherish and defend religious liberty, and deny the right of any secular or religious authority to impose a confession of faith upon a church or body of churches. We honor the principles of soul competency and the priesthood of believers, affirming together both our liberty in Christ and our accountability to each other under the Word of God.

Baptist churches, associations, and general bodies have adopted confessions of faith as a witness to the world, and as instruments of doctrinal accountability. We are not embarrassed to state before the world that these are doctrines we hold precious and as essential to the Baptist tradition of faith and practice."

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At the beginning of his writing the Institutes, John Calvin asserted that the knowledge needed for life can be divided into two parts: 1) the knowledge of God and 2) the knowledge of man.

You cannot rightly define yourself apart from God. So if we are to mature in our faith, we must pursue an understanding of God according to the way God's Word leads.

Let me break down some of this statement according to the different words in it.

Holistic refers to the comprehensive nature of our beliefs. Does a particular claim we make reflect the whole of Scripture and the progressive nature of this great revelation? We must check that we are not leaving out parts of Scripture to fit our own preferences, isolating verses or books so that we do not have to consider changing.

Beautiful refers to the consistency our claims should have with God's self-revelation. If God is perfectly beautiful, then my claims need to fit with how He presents Himself according to Scripture. We must show humility to allow our claims to be checked by Scripture and one another using Scripture.

Doxology refers to worship. Is the God of all glory receiving prominence within our beliefs? If we pursue knowledge of God this year but are not led to adore Him in worship, then we are doing it wrong. Remember how we started with Jude 3. Jude concludes his exhortation to contend for the faith with a doxological statement. 24

Now to him who is able to protect you from stumbling and to make you stand in the presence of his glory, without blemish and with great joy, 25 to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority before all time, now and forever. Amen.

Theology pursued rightly is God leading you to Himself so that you stand in His presence amazed and awed by His majesty and glory.

Right affections and right actions, also known as orthopathy and orthopraxy, are intimately tied to right belief, also known as orthodoxy. If you are finding your heart grow cold toward God or finding that you are acting sinfully, you can trace that tendency back to how you are currently viewing God inappropriately. It is for this reason that A. W. Tozer said that what you think about God is the most important thing about you. Your belief about God will determine your whole life. Orthodoxy must and will always lead to orthopathy and orthopraxy. True and right belief must lead and will lead to right love for God and others and right practice. What we believe has the power to shape our entire experience in life.

Lastly, in safeguarding the gospel with right beliefs, the gospel safeguards the church. If we ever give up the good news of Christ, we give up the very means by which God brought our particular church into existence. You may not think it possible for us to reach a point in which we would give up the gospel, but churches that slide start somewhere. Every generation of a church must reaffirm its confidence in God according to His revealed Word with their own words. If the church does not affirm such faith with their statement of faith, they leave theology to the imagination of the individuals without any accountability or to the most influential voice around them without accountability.

Let's end with hearing again Jude 24–25, as we prepare for this year as God gives us His Word so that we take it in and by His Spirit's guidance, we speak it back to Him.  
24 Now to him who is able to protect you from stumbling and to make you stand in the presence of his glory, without blemish and with great joy, 25 to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority before all time, now and forever. Amen.