

The Faith, in Deed and Truth

By Ethan R. Longhenry

“Beloved, while I was giving all diligence to write unto you of our common salvation, I was constrained to write unto you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints” (Jude 1:3). “My little children, let us not love in word, neither with the tongue; but in deed and truth” (1John 3:18).

When considering current trends in Christianity, it is hard not to notice the “mixed messages” which are sent regarding doctrine and practice and their place in the faith. To some, doctrine is all important: having the right understanding of doctrine becomes the primary focus. In this view, the health of one’s faith is based almost entirely on how strongly one accepts proper doctrinal standards. Much of the preaching and teaching focuses on proper doctrinal standards, giving the impression that as long as everyone in the congregation agrees on what is true, all is well. The primary challenges are seen as the prospect of false teaching being introduced or any questioning of the emphasis on doctrine. To others, various aspects of practice is all important: doing the right types of things becomes the primary focus. In this view, the health of one’s faith is based almost entirely on how one has acted in self-development and to the benefit of others. Much of the preaching and teaching focuses on proper practice, giving the impression that as long as everyone is active in the right types of deeds, all is well. The primary challenges are seen as a slackening of effort or any questioning on the emphasis on practice.

These two types of groups seek to reinforce their messages by using one another as the foil: the group emphasizing doctrine denounces the group emphasizing practice for lax standards, weak teaching, and fostering heresy; the group emphasizing practice denounces the group emphasizing doctrine for legalism, hypocrisy, and superficiality. The conflict seems intractable. Who is right? What should Christianity be about?

Each side has grasped an aspect to the faith we are to share in Christ Jesus but have taken it to an unhealthy extreme. According to the New Testament, Christians are to contend for “the faith,” the standard of truth revealed by God through Jesus, but to do so “in deed and in truth” (1John 3:18; Jude 3).

From the beginning Christianity has been based in the teachings of and about Jesus of Nazareth: His life, death, resurrection, lordship, and return (1Cor. 15:1-3). His Apostles were given authority to establish the proper and healthy teachings about life in His Kingdom (Matt. 18:18; Acts 2:42). The way Christians live is to flow from what they think and feel, and their thoughts and feelings are to be determined by the types of things Jesus thought and felt (2Cor. 10:5; Phil. 4:8; 1John 2:6). Thus Christians are to do all things by the authority of Jesus (Col. 3:17); they must hold firm to the true teachings of Christ and stand up against false teachings (Rom. 16:16-17; Gal. 1:6-9; 1John 4:1-3; Jude 3).

Yet, from the beginning, Christianity has been the practice of the faith in Christ: following after Jesus, growing in our faith, sharing life with the fellow people of God, showing love, compassion, and mercy upon everyone (Luke 6:27-36; Eph. 4:11-16; 1John 1:7). These are all based in Jesus’ true teachings, and healthy doctrine always involves not just the substance of what is taught but also the practice thereof (Titus 2:1-10). Faith without works is dead; works without faith is futile (Rom. 3:20; James 2:26).

We do well, therefore, to recognize that contending for the faith demands that we love in deed and truth, and that the reason we work is based in Jesus and what He has established as the true and living way. Focus on doctrine to the exclusion of practice can lead to sanctimony and hypocrisy; focus on practice to the exclusion of doctrine can lead to compromised standards and heresy. Let us instead practice according to the teachings of Jesus and be saved!

Tipping God **By Kent Heaton**

“Behold a certain man went with a friend into a place to eat. After the lunch the waitress brought the bill and the man, in the sight of his friend, placed a sum of money beneath his plate. The friend was amazed and asked what this money is. The man replied that it is the customary thing to do to place 15% of the bill under the plate. The friend was confused. A waitress served the man for a few minutes and he gave her 15% of the bill. His Heavenly Father has served him all his life, given him every good and perfect gift and the man is offended when asked to give something to support the work of his Heavenly Father. Does the man think more of the waitress than he does of his Lord?” (Author unknown).

The eternal struggle of man has always been the ingratitude for what God has done for him every day. Jesus reminds us that God “makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45). Paul and Barnabas pleaded with the citizens of Lystra to know the “living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them, who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:15-17). Selfish man believes that he has the power and wisdom to produce crops, glean the fields and harvest the bounty of this earth without the help of the Lord. His technology gives him a smug feeling of security that falsely belies the reality that without God man is nothing (Isa. 40).

When men exalt their own superiority they become unthankful and futile in their thoughts and their foolish hearts are darkened by the pride of life (Rom. 1:18-23). Like the man in the story above the view of God is degraded in contrast to offering to others a tribute of honor. What has God done for me? Why should I honor God with my life? While the hard-working individual can expect a monetary reward for their work how can we deny God His due? People of God are asked to return the bounty of their material worth for the glory of God and often a pitiful measure is begrudging torn from their hands.

How much should I give to the Lord? Tithing was a Jewish practice removed from God’s law under Christ but now giving comes from the heart (2Cor. 9:6-11). Here is the test of the heart and the hand: given a choice many people submit the scraps of their wealth and sometimes begrudge that and worry about how much to give. It is not a matter of how much we give it is a matter of how much we keep. In light of that comparison how can we view what God has done for us and we do so little? We gladly tip the waiter 15% and throw a few dollars before God’s throne.

It is often said that repaying the debt we owe Christ for His sacrifice is impossible and many give that way. The amount is not the question because the Lord sees the heart of man and what he trusts in (Matt. 6:19-21). Loving God so much and trusting Him so little to care for our earthly needs drives our motives for giving (or not giving). The fool of Luke 12 left all he had on earth when he died because he was not rich toward God (Luke 12:13-21). Life is not about the abundance of things we have because what we have is an abundance of God’s blessings if we trust in Him.