

Countering Nominal Christianity (1)

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[0 : 00] Return with me now to the passage we read, that's the letter of Jude, and we'll read at verse 3. Letter of Jude at verse 3.

Beloved, though I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, and godly people who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

First, Jude was not writing history. It wasn't a reflection on something that had happened a long time in the past that he was actually bringing before the people that he wrote to.

He was reflecting on the circumstances that were currently found in the church of his own time. In other words, he was writing a letter in an urgent situation that appealed, as he says here, to those that he was writing to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

[1 : 18] We understand that Jude, as he calls himself the brother of James, would have been one of Christ's family. The half-brother of the Lord, in other words, from the same mother, Mary, who had family after she gave birth to Jesus.

And James and Jude were of that family. And we understand from Scripture, too, that they did not come themselves fully to accept Christ as the Saviour, and didn't understand these things until after his resurrection.

And that then they were confirmed in faith in him as their Saviour, which itself, of course, is such a remarkable thing. Just as it would be for Mary, just as it would be for Mary, to put her trust in the son that she gave birth to, for her eternal salvation.

So would every other member of his family who would want to be saved. That's, by the way, but that seems to be who wrote the letter of Jude that bears this name, Jude.

He's writing, as he says, in a way that addresses the situation that he finds in his own day. He had actually intended, he says, to write an essay.

[2 : 36] He was going to write about our common salvation. Something possibly similar to some part of the Apostle Paul's letters, where he takes great chunks of theology, tells us about Jesus, tells us about God, tells us about the things of our salvation.

Things that are absolutely foundational for our understanding of Christianity and our relationship to God. That's what Jude was going to do. I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation.

But I found it necessary to write appealing to you. Instead of doing that, he changed his mind. He thought, the situation is just too urgent to be taken up with a theological essay.

I must write a letter instead. A letter of appeal to those people of the church of his time to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

Now there's a point in that itself before we go further. We're going to take two or three studies from the book of Jude on what we're going to entitle countering nominal Christianity.

[3 : 40] That's what this letter was about. And that's why it's so relevant and so important for our own age as well as we seek to counter nominal Christianity.

But it's important to realize that we too live in an age where there are many issues that we need to confront as the church of God, as believers, and Christ as Christians.

We don't live back in the 16th, 15th, 17th century, 1800s, whenever it was. We use material that people in those days provided for us. A lot of the time we go back to the likes of Puritan writings. Writings that came about in a time of tremendous activity under God when these great Christians, these great men and women of God, actually wrote these massive treatises on theology which are

still so relevant and abidingly of importance to the church.

But we don't live back then. However much we need to use what they wrote, you have to apply it to the situations that you meet with today. And we as the people of God today have to address the spiritual and moral environment in which we live by the providence of God.

[4 : 57] No use us casting our mind back to the 1600s, looking at the issues that faced the Puritans, and they then say, that's how I must live my life in relation to these kind of topics.

Of course, some of these things will be repeated. There's nothing new under the sun. Some of the problems meeting us today, they met within the 16th, 15th century, whenever it was.

But what you and I have to be sure of is that the spiritual and moral environment in which we live, today's world, these are the issues that we must address with the gospel, with our lives in the gospel.

And that's why Jude, as indeed the whole Bible, but if we confine it to the epistle of Jude, that's why Jude is so relevant. Jude was addressing nominal Christianity, although there were excesses to that as well, as he tells us in the middle part of his letter.

What is nominal Christianity? Nominal Christianity, we're going to look at more of the detail of it just in a moment, but nominal Christianity, just as the word suggests nominal, means in name only.

[6 : 08] Being a Christian, or a Christian church, or a Christian congregation in name only. In other words, you could be a Christian congregation today in name only.

I'm not saying you are, but we could be a Christian congregation in name only, just by contrasting us with, say for example, a meeting of Muslims, or of Buddhists.

You could say, well there's the Buddhist congregation, there's the Islamic congregation, there's the Christian congregation. You're Christians, to that extent, in name only.

And what Jude is doing is taking what existed in his day as nominal Christianity, people who lived with the name of Christians, but whose life actually was very different to the way Christians should be.

whose beliefs actually had come to be different to the beliefs a Christian should have. And that nominal Christianity exists in abundance all around yourself.

[7 : 15] It's there, you don't have to go very far to meet with it. A Christianity in name only, which has come in many respects to deviate from the Bible, from the teachings of the Bible, from the doctrines of the faith, which we'll see as a phrase which Jude uses.

So many different ways in which nominal Christianity shows itself. And the Lord, through the epistle of Jude, is calling your mind and my mind today to counter that nominal Christianity.

Let's have a look at it in more detail. What is this nominal Christianity? Why is Jude so urgently appealing to those people who are going to read his letter, that they contend for the faith that was once delivered to the saints?

Because you see, that's what nominal Christianity has left behind. The faith that was once delivered to the saints is what you and I ought to keep and maintain and live by.

And nominal Christianity is a deviation from that. The first thing you have to say about the nominal Christianity that Jude describes, is that it's an inside job.

[8 : 30] It's not an assault from outside the church. Nominal Christianity is not something that actually comes to attack the church by living outside it completely, and just then coming to assault it from outside.

Nominal Christianity lives within the church. Within the visible church, as you see it, the church that describes itself as the church. That's what makes it so dangerous.

That's what makes it, in fact, the greatest danger to the gospel. You know what it's like when you read about some robbery or other, where a bank's been robbed, or a warehouse, or something like that, and then the police, the investigator, or whatever, they'll say, well, this was actually an inside job.

They had help from inside. They couldn't have actually carried out this so successfully without having had help from the inside. And that's what nominal Christianity is.

It is help from inside the church to the enemy of the gospel. It is something inside the church that really opens the door, if you like, for the enemy to come in and eventually, in some cases, actually take over.

[9 : 40] It's an inside job. And that's why it's always the biggest danger the church faces, when it's something from inside that proves a threat to the gospel.

I'm going to commend to you an article in the record this month by Reverend David Robertson. It's an article against Steve Chalk, who's a prominent evangelical in England, who has come to publish his views recently in favor of same-sex marriage.

Steve Chalk previously, some years ago, wrote a book denouncing Christ's death as penal substitution. That's to say, Christ in our place bearing the penalty that we deserved, and that he took instead of his people.

Chalk denounced that. He said, that's not worthy of the gospel. That shouldn't be the way we understand the death of Christ. There's a prominent evangelical. There's a man who bears the name of an evangelical.

There's somebody who actually passes himself off in the wider world as a prominent evangelical, as a man who's true to the teaching of the Bible in the evangelical way of understanding it.

[10:53] And yet, these are the things that he's now actually promoting. That's why David Robertson has very successfully, I think, in that short article, he has actually set out why this is simply not acceptable in terms of the Bible's teaching, but also why it's so dangerous.

It's an inside job. It's opening the door to the enemy of our souls from the inside. And that's what Jude is actually saying here.

They are, in verse 12 he says, he describes these people, they are blemishes at your love feasts. The love feasts would be their communion times.

As they gathered together to celebrate and mark the Lord's death and the Lord's Supper, that was very often called the love feast in the early church. And you see what he's saying?

These people are blemishes in your love feast. And in this translation here in the pulpit Bible, it says hidden reefs. The one I've got at home is blemishes.

[12:01] That's possibly how it is in the church copy as well. But the word actually means a hidden reef. You know how dangerous a hidden reef is.

Unless you're actually very careful and know the territory very well, a hidden reef is a chunk of rock that's not far below the surface of the sea, but you can't see it because it's just covered by the water.

It's a hidden reef. That's what makes it so dangerous. That's why you've got to watch how close you go to it and stay well away from it in fact. That's what it's describing these people as, these nominal Christians.

They are like hidden reefs at your love feast. They share your love feast. You sit with them at the Lord's table, he's saying to these writers. This writer is saying to those who are receiving his letter. These people, the nominal Christians that you've come to know and come to live amongst you, that's what they're like.

That's why they're so dangerous. Because they're doing all of these things with you, but they're actually hidden reefs. They'll cause you wreckage, unless you're very careful.

[13:11] Well, how has it come about? How does nominal Christianity come to take over a congregation? Let's just think of ourselves and then extend that as you can to the wider church.

How would nominal Christianity actually come into our own congregation? How does it take it? If it's something that's an inside job, how does it get inside?

How does it begin inside? Well, you see what Judah's saying. Verse 4, certain people have crept in unnoticed.

That's a very, very important description and a very solemn one. Certain people have crept in unnoticed. It didn't happen all of a sudden.

It wasn't that somebody stood up in the middle of a fellowship one night and said, I no longer believe in the resurrection, but I'm a member of this church. It crept in unnoticed. Certain people crept in a way that wasn't at first obvious and gradually just began to promote views that were contrary to the gospel, contrary to the truth of God.

[14:24] It's not something that happens all at once. It's stealthy. It might take years. You know, I was watching one of these nature programs recently and it showed a leopard stalking its victim.

A leopard stalking its victim. Let's say, I don't know what the distance would have been. Let's say it was 50 meters when it actually picked out its victim, this little deer. That was actually, let's say, 50 meters away.

And you could see the leopard just locking its eyes onto it. Now, it's 50 meters away. There's no way the leopard's going to catch it from 50 meters. If it shows itself, it'll be long gone.

And for the first 40 meters of that distance, the leopard just sneaks through the grass unnoticed all the way through these 40 meters with its eyes fixed on its victim, step by step, just gradually, stealthily moving its way up.

And then when it's just about 10 meters or even less away, bam! It bounces. What does that say? Well, it's saying that most of the journey was covered in a way that the victim was totally oblivious to.

[15 : 48] The biggest part of the journey was taken up with stealth. It crept through it. That's how it is with a church. That's how it is with nominal Christianity coming to enter into a fellowship and then come to spread its influence.

It creeps in. It's something that happens over time. It's something by which there's stealth involved on the part of the enemy. And gradually, it comes to the point where it actually becomes then obvious, but then it's too late.

or very often too late. It's then easy to take over. Most of the work has been done in the approach. In the years of stealth, certain people have crept in unnoticed.

The changes are gradual. People take away things that the Bible specifically teaches are right or wrong.

People add things to the Bible's teaching that we feel that are felt to be necessary as human thinking, human understanding develops.

[17 : 05] science finds various things out that weren't known in the days of Paul or at least not to the same extent. So you actually can take things and add them to the Bible.

You can take things in the Bible and take them out if you think they're no longer relevant to the age in which we live. If you think they're contrary to the scientific discoveries that actually characterize the present age.

And you see, bit by bit, year by year, that nominal Christianity begins to take over. It steals in, it creeps in, it's an inside job, it's hardly noticed, and then before you know it, it's taken over.

That's what Jude is saying. Nominal Christianity, it's an inside job. It happens very gradually, very stealthily. And that's why it's so important, friends, for you and I to watch our own lives.

That's why it's so important for me to watch my life. If I start saying things that are just a wee bit out of keeping with the Bible's teaching on important issues, on foundational issues, then be careful.

[18 : 22] And if you find that, then you have a right to tell me about it. Because you don't want nominal Christianity to actually come to begin and then spread its influence throughout the fellowship, throughout the congregation.

It's the same for yourselves. Watch over your own lives. Indeed, that's what we're going to see in another study later on as he comes to the end of his letter, near the end of his letter. But you, beloved, keep yourselves in the love of God.

Keep yourselves within what God's love has provided for you. The things of the gospel, the faith that has once for all been delivered for the saints. That's why it's so important to be watchful, to have our eyes open to the approach stealthily of the enemy.

It's hugely important. It's not impossible for people to be saved in a nominally Christian congregation. But it's very rare.

Because things like the need to be born again and repentance and eternal judgment and even eternity itself, they're not taught.

[19 : 32] People have discounted these things. Nominal Christianity doesn't accept these things. so the truth of God is not set out before people. So it's an inside job.

But secondly, it's about doctrine and ethics. That really means it's about what we believe at doctrine and ethics how we behave.

And these two things are related. What we believe very much has an impact on how we behave. if we believe there's no judgment, if we believe there's no resurrection, then as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, get to it.

Live your life the way you choose. It won't make any difference. Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die. But if there is a resurrection as there is, if there is a judgment as there is, if there is an eternity the way the Bible says it is, then it's going to affect the way you live.

It's going to affect behavior. The doctrine you believe, the doctrine you've come to understand, has a direct impact practically on the way you live your life or ought to. That's the way the Bible puts the two together, doctrine and ethics.

[20 : 48] And these are the two things throughout the epistle of Jude that you can see coming across to us. This false teaching that had come to invade the people that he was writing to.

It was already in the church. He was writing to them to contend against that, to contend for the faith. Now he's saying what is believed and what is how we behave are actually so important.

That's why he's referring here to the faith. I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

He says the same later on, you yourselves beloved, building yourself up in or upon your most holy faith. Now the faith in both of these verses does not refer to our believing.

We use the word faith, the Bible uses the word faith to describe our believing, our faith, how we use faith. The kind of thing faith is as we put faith in Christ, as we believe God.

[21 : 59] Our believing is faith but it's not the faith. The faith is the body of doctrine, the body of teaching on which our faith, our believing rests.

The faith, in other words, is similar to what Paul wrote to the Corinthians again in 1 Corinthians 15 significantly when he's dealing with such a thing as the resurrection that people in Corinth have already come to renounce.

He says there, I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you which you received and in which you stand and by which you are being saved.

See, that's where it begins. I would remind you of the gospel and the gospel is what I received. God gave it to him. This body of teaching and in which you stand which you received, he says, which you stand and by which you are being saved.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.

[23 : 17] And it's important, as we'll see in a minute, why Paul refers there to the scriptures twice in one verse or two verses. This is what I received, he says, this body of doctrine, this teaching, this gospel.

This is what I delivered to you. These things that are of first importance. And Jude is describing it as the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

In other words, it was once for all delivered through the apostles, to the people of God, to the church of God, and because it was once for all delivered, it's not adaptable.

You don't actually take it and change it itself in its substance. You apply it, as we said, to the circumstances of your day. You work out every possible method that's acceptable to God to bring that gospel, to present that gospel to the people of our age, to the people of the present day.

But the gospel itself is unchangeable. It's delivered once for all. The core elements of that gospel resurrection of Christ, the death of Christ, what these things are about, faith in Christ, the need to be born again, the importance of repentance from sin, the coming of Christ again and judgment.

[24 : 36] All of these are core elements of the faith. And as they are core elements of the faith, God has given them to us that we must contend for them when they're under attack, that we must keep them as they are, as they have been given to us.

It's like many things that are handed on to us, that are precious to us, for one thing, because of who they came from.

Heirlooms. You know, many people will say to us who know about antiques and these things, that if you try and change the appearance of something that's an antique, if you try and polish it up too much or paint it, or if you take a painting that's been in its original frame and backing and so on, and you kind of take it out of that and you put it into a modern frame because the old one was getting a bit worn, or there was a bit of woodworm in the back of it, the expert will tell you, you shouldn't have done that.

You've spoiled the value of that. You've decreased the value of it hugely. That's how it is with the gospel, with the faith, because some nominal Christianity thinks the faith as it was passed on to us, it actually doesn't look right for the modern age.

We've got to change it, we've got to take it out of its old framework and we've got to renew that framework, we've got to polish it up somewhat so that we change some of its elements and then we present it to the world of our day.

[26 : 11] A Jew is saying you've lost the gospel if you do that. It's the faith once delivered to the saints. That's why nominal Christianity attacks these core elements of the faith.

Things like creation. Instead of creation you get evolutionistic ideas. We don't really know how the world began. There was some kind of big bang, but what there was before that or what caused it, where did the energy come from?

Well, we don't really know about that, but it just happened. And the universe as we know it and see it still developing and growing, we're told that's the result of that big bang, that's the aftermath of it. And it's just going to go on like that. It's going to go on like that for us on earth at least till the sun runs out of energy. That'll be it. Billions of years from now on.

The Bible tells you simply God created the heavens and the earth. And he shaped it into the way it currently is. And he created man to live on the earth.

[27 : 23] And he gave man, as we see that environment, which man abused and from which man fell. And that explains the doctrine of sin, where sin came in and what sin is about.

And what God did then to save sinners by sending the Son to die in this world. All of these things are denied in nominal Christianity.

The resurrection, the rebirth, and go into the area of ethics. Nominal Christianity will tell you, even if it's the name of evangelicalism, same-sex marriage is alright.

That's what we need in the present age. We've got to actually dress things up. We've got to make ourselves relevant. Well, you don't make yourself relevant by changing the gospel. You cease to be relevant.

You might actually live to please minority pressure groups. You don't please God. You don't have his favor.

[28 : 21] You don't have any guarantee that people's lives will be changed for the good if all you're presenting to them is what they want to hear, what they themselves insist the gospel should be.

It's about doctrine and ethics. It has to do with the faith. That's what comes to be attacked in nominal Christianity.

Christianity in name only. The second thing in terms of doctrine and ethics is Jude's use of scripture. We saw how Paul referred to the scripture.

These things I delivered to you as they were given to me. How that Christ died according to the scriptures. How that he was raised according to the scriptures.

And you notice how Jude here verse 5 for example now I want to remind you though you once fully knew it that Jesus who saved the people in other words he's referring to their knowledge of what's already been written about the exodus from the land of Egypt.

[29 : 25] And then you go to verse 17 and now you must remember beloved the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. The things that have come to be written through the apostles God giving them this to be written.

And the scriptures themselves are so much behind so much of what Jude actually says. That is the most foundational issue of all.

We've said that this inside job by which nominal Christianity takes a hold and then spreads itself, opens the door to the enemy to come in. That it is indeed something that attacks the foundational doctrines of the faith.

Things like resurrection of Christ and the other things we've mentioned. Yes, but then all of these are actually built upon something that is foundational to them also.

That is the Bible, the scripture, the word of God. Today I believe that Christ rose from the dead physically. I believe today that Christ died, the death the Bible describes, a death that was in my place when he took the penalty of my sin.

[30 : 44] I believe that it's necessary to repent of sin and turn to God in order to be saved. I believe that I need to put my trust in Christ alone for acceptance with God.

I believe that Christ is coming again on the last day to judge the world. I believe that I'm justified in Christ, that my sin is no longer held against me. I believe that I'm a child of God by adoption.

I believe that I have sanctification going on in my life through the Holy Spirit living in my soul. I believe all these things. Why do I believe them? Because I believe this to be the word of God.

And if I cease to believe this Bible to be the word of God, I have no guarantee tomorrow that I'll believe any of these other things as I do now. Because if I change my doctrine of scripture, I'm liable to change every other doctrine that rests upon it.

And that's why the main attack of the enemy is always against scripture. Against your understanding of what the Bible is.

[31 : 56] you look at it, nominal Christianity by and large attacks the Bible. Comes to dispute the authority of the Bible, the finality of the Bible.

Comes to actually reject the whole idea of this being the word of God that authenticates itself, that speaks for itself, that makes itself clear on the most important issues.

that's why nominal Christianity takes the Bible and takes things out of it and twists other things around. Takes verses that are crystal clear to any reasonable reading of them and says, that's not actually what it means, or that's not what we must make it mean today.

Well, it either means that or it doesn't. It either means that once or for all, or it doesn't mean anything really at all. It means what you want it to mean. The changing of the doctrine of scripture is no guarantee then of anything else staying in a way that's according to God's will.

My friends, that's why it's critically important that you never lose your conviction that this is the word of God, that this is God's infallible truth.

[33 : 23] that your life has to be based squarely on the doctrine of scripture being God's word, God's authoritative, infallible, unchanging word.

Because if we change that, well, everything else could be affected. That's where nominal Christianity especially comes to take hold.

God's word. That's why Jude here uses the words remind and remember in verses 5 and 17. I want to remind you.

And then verse 17, you must remember, beloved. Because both of these words imply that the things he wants them to remember and the things he's reminding them of are the things that are already written.

it implies that the words that he's reminding them of, the words that he's sending them back to reconsider and remember, are the words of the faith, of the scriptures, of the will of God revealed.

[34 : 38] So nominal Christianity, it's an inside job, it's about doctrine and ethics. But let's not leave it at Jude.

We're all Christians today in that sense that we form part of a Christian congregation. People looking at us today can say, that's the Christian congregation that meets in Garapost.

You could say the same next door, of course. Let's just confine it to ourselves. And that's true of every single person here that you come to form part of what's known as a Christian congregation. A congregation that lives within the framework of Christianity. But you and I must now think for ourselves, am I more than a Christian in name only?

Am I a nominal Christian myself? Have I come to be inside what the word Christian means to me on the outside?

[35 : 45] Am I myself a nominal Christian? Let's pray. We give thanks, Lord our God, for the way that your word informs us, the way your word challenges us, the way your word assures us.

We thank you for the way it makes us uncomfortable, and for the comfort that you bring to us. And we bless you, O Lord, that in your wisdom you have designed your word with these effects.

We pray that whatever effect your word today has upon our minds and our souls, that we might indeed be led by your word, by your truth, to know that we ourselves are not merely nominal Christians, that we have our trust, our confidence, of conviction in yourself.

And we pray, Lord, that you would grant to us these words that we have been studying, that they might be blessed continually to our souls. Hear us now, we pray, for Jesus' sake.

Amen.