

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
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WHEAT AMONG THE TARES (Part 1)

Introduction: It has been said that theology is the art of making fine distinctions. There is certainly some truth to that, and the book of Jude illustrates several of these key distinctions for us. The main point of Jude¹ is that there are false converts and false teachers in the midst of true Christians and churches. This letter gives an excellent biblical foundation for the historic Protestant distinction between the visible church and the invisible church, as Jude shows that this tension has always existed within the people of God, going all the way back to Cain, immediately after the Fall of his parents.

1. Pay careful attention to the fact that Jude “found it necessary to write” this epistle as a call to action. He does not relish this theological combat. In fact, he would much rather “write about our common salvation,” i.e. an exuberant Gospel message that every Christian loves, but there are very real dangers that need countering. Even if they feel abstract and difficult to grasp at times, the theological doctrines and distinctions which we find here in Jude are seriously important for us to know! If we neglect them, we will be more easily led into extremely serious errors, and perhaps even a false gospel.
 - a. Commentators have speculated on a number of possible enemies that Jude could have in mind in this letter.² The fact that Jude does not specify the group he has in mind strongly suggests, however, that he intended this letter to apply more broadly than to just one group, even if a particular party did prompt him to write it.
 - b. Just because Jude and other biblical authors use such strong language in condemning enemies of the truth does not mean we should be cavalier about using similar language. As we will see later, in verses 22-23 especially, Jude calls on us to exercise wisdom in how we confront people, especially within the church. Some people have doubts because of genuine confusion, and this does not necessarily make them hypocrites.
 - c. Nevertheless, when the Word of God is under serious attack, we must be prepared to vigorously defend it. We are Christ’s witnesses in the world, and as imperfect and weak as we are, the Spirit still uses us to spread the Word.

¹ There are three men named Jude mentioned in other parts of the New Testament who could possibly be the author of this letter. As D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo have argued, however, the fact that Jude calls himself the brother of James in verse 1 makes it most likely that he is the Jude who is the half-brother of Jesus (*Introduction to the New Testament*, 690). If he meant a different James besides the brother of Christ who was the most prominent in the early chapters of Acts, he likely would have explained who this James was. The reason Jude calls himself a “servant” of Christ rather than his brother is likely to avoid giving the impression that he has a closer connection to Christ than the Apostles. Therefore the best evidence points to Jude being the brother of James and Jesus, but even if it were written by a different Jude it wouldn’t significantly change the interpretation of this letter.

² Based on clues from both Jude and 2 Peter 2, one of the most popular theories is that Jude is writing against the Zealots, a group of Jews who sought to violently overthrow Roman rule of their homeland. They continued to be active in the decades after Christ’s ascension, eventually leading to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. It makes a lot of sense that Jude would write to discourage Christians from joining this group, and implicitly deny that Christ was the true Messiah as a result (see verse 4). We should be careful, however, to not rest any interpretation of the text of Jude solely on speculation about his opponents and make the whole book out to be about political radicalism, for example.

2. As mentioned above, the distinction between the visible and invisible church runs throughout Jude, so that you really cannot make much sense of the letter without grasping this doctrine.
 - a. Many authors have criticized or dismissed this visible/invisible distinction in recent decades without really understanding it.³ Originally formulated by Martin Bucer, the best summary statements of this doctrine are found in the Reformed confessions, both the Westminster standards.⁴
 - b. This distinction should not be confused with the equally important distinction between the true and false church. There are many false churches in the world which can be clearly identified as false churches by those who have a decent grasp of the Scriptures. Since it is possible to identify these churches as false by what they say and do, they are *visibly* false. The Belgic Confession gives the clearest summary of this distinction,⁵ which many of the same authors who object to the visible/invisible distinction also confuse.⁶ We should not consider heretical sects like Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses, nor churches which preach Oneness Pentecostalism or the Prosperity Gospel, to be true churches. They are not even a part of the visible church, and we would not commune their members with ours because we do not share one Lord, one faith, and one baptism with them.⁷
 - c. Jude is not writing about these clearly false churches, because these would not be "unnoticed" by discerning Christians. He is writing about Christian teachers and laypeople who look very much like true believers on the outside, but are really putting on an act. They are actively deceiving others (possibly even themselves), and sometimes even the Apostles.⁸
 - d. Despite the fact they outwardly appear to be members of the same community, Jude vividly describes for us how differently they are on the inside.
 - i. Instead of the revelation of God, false converts rely on "their dreams," ephemeral experiences that are fleeting and unreliable (verse 8). We should take this as a

³ For example, Douglas Wilson asserts in chapter 8 of *Reformed is Not Enough* that to distinguish between the visible and invisible church is to disparage the visible church and become "baptistic," though he never explains why he thinks this. He does not seem to grasp that distinctions do not require separation. For example, we do not have to consider Jesus's two natures mixed into one nature in order to avoid disparaging the human nature. Christ's divine nature is clearly greater in every way than his human nature, but that does not mean his human nature is unimportant. Likewise, the fact that the invisible church is the purest form of the church does not mean that we can do without the visible church. The visible church provides the only ordinary means we have to participate in the invisible church.

⁴ "The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all. The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation." - Westminster Confession of Faith, 25.1-2.

⁵ "The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church." - Belgic Confession, Art. 29.

⁶ Federal Vision supporters, including Douglas Wilson and Peter Leithart, frequently argue that we ought to consider the Roman Catholic Church a true, visible church, even if they acknowledge it is corrupted. This, of course, is directly contrary to the intent of the Reformers in drawing these distinctions. Early on, when they still had some hope of reforming Rome, the Reformers considered them to still be included in the visible church, but this shifted after the Council of Trent published its decrees. The Council of Trent anathematized nearly every distinctively Protestant doctrine at issue, and those decrees are still binding on the Roman church today. Protestants took this as the final and clear separation of the Roman church from the true, visible church. The Belgic Confession, written as the Council of Trent was winding down and its intent was clear, describes the "false church" in Article 29 by clearly alluding to several of these issues against Rome on the authority of Scripture over tradition, the number of the sacraments, and persecution of Protestants as heretics.

⁷ Ephesians 4:5

⁸ You can hear the grief in Paul's description of Demas's betrayal in 2 Timothy 4:10, "For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica." Even the Apostle Paul was severely let down by those whom he thought were his co-laborers in the Lord.

- serious warning against movements that teach us to interpret vague feelings and sensations as if they were prophecies.
- ii. Although they pay lip service to the truth for a time, they do not actually understand it like a true believer does. Therefore, “these people blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively” (verse 10). Similar to the point about dreams, Jude says that false believers pridefully rely on their own intuition rather than humbly seek to learn at the feet of the Lord. Ironically, by exalting themselves and thinking they can intuitively grasp the things of God, they actually lower themselves to the level of beasts.
 - iii. Most of the natural metaphors Jude uses in verses 12-13 have to do with a lack of natural fruit.
- e. These hypocrites, although we cannot easily identify them now, will be exposed eventually, because they do not produce any true fruit of the Spirit. Rather than loving others in the way Christ loved us and submitting to his Law, they use and exploit others in the church for their own gain. This is why he compares them to “hidden reefs” (i.e. causing the shipwreck of others) and “shepherds feeding themselves” in verse 12. “Waterless clouds” also deny farmers the rain they desperately need to feed their families, so that metaphor may be intended in a similar way.
3. The numerous examples that Jude draws from the pages of the Old Testament make it clear that the tense and dismaying situation that churches now find themselves in is not new.
 - a. For many years of his life growing up, Cain would have appeared very similar to his brother Abel, and later Seth. We even know he offered sacrifices to the Lord from his produce, so he at least appeared to be somewhat pious. You would not have been able to tell that their hearts were different, because Cain’s heart was not exposed until jealousy of his brother led him to commit murder. You would not have been able to tell which angels will fall before they did, either (verse 6). Likewise, the false brothers that Jude is warning about will usually not be publicly known until they reveal themselves by their actions. Most often, this is when they embrace clear heresy, or defy the discipline of the church for their sin.⁹
 - b. Jude’s use of the Israelites in the wilderness highlights the massive scale of this problem in the Old Testament. The vast majority of them rejected the promised land, a type of heaven, at Kadesh-barnea, and almost their entire generation died in the wilderness as a result. Only the two faithful spies, Caleb and Joshua, were set apart and actually entered the promised land.¹⁰
 - c. We will deal with the more unusual examples that Jude gives here (especially Michael and Enoch) next week, along with some more practical conclusions.

⁹ One of the most common charges in Reformed church discipline cases is “contumacy,” which means something like obstruction of justice. This might sound like elders are abusing their authority and punishing Christians for no particular sin except procedural issues, but the real reason for this is that we don’t excommunicate people the moment they commit even some grievous sin. We follow the process outlined in Matthew 18:15-20, so it is not the sin itself but the failure to respond to these rebukes and repent of that sin that ends up being the cause for excommunication. That is “contumacy.”

¹⁰ As Moses said to the men of Reuben, “Why will you discourage the heart of the people of Israel from going over into the land that the LORD has given them? Your fathers did this, when I sent them from Kadesh-barnea to see the land. For when they went up to the Valley of Eshcol and saw the land, they discouraged the heart of the people of Israel from going into the land that the LORD had given them. And the LORD’s anger was kindled on that day, and he swore, saying, ‘Surely none of the men who came up out of Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, because they have not wholly followed me, none except Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua the son of Nun, for they have wholly followed the LORD.’” - Numbers 32:7-12

- d. If the people of God in both Testaments had the same fundamental problem with hypocrites in their midst, this raises important questions about how to interpret Jeremiah 31:31-34, which says the whole covenant community will know the Lord in the New Covenant. Without going on an extended discussion of this passage, remember that Old Testament prophecy is often fulfilled in stages. There are reminders of this both before and after the famous “New Covenant” passage, where Jeremiah describes the prosperity of God’s people in such extravagant glory that we cannot think it has yet come to pass. We must keep this context in mind when reading verses 31-34, and see that while the New Testament church enjoys greater purity than in the days of Moses or Elijah, we have not yet reached the complete fulness of those promises.¹¹
4. There is a subtle theme of predestination running throughout the letter of Jude, and it is intimately connected to the idea of the invisible church.
- a. Verse 1 addresses Christians as “those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ.” This characterization gives complete and clear credit to God’s sovereignty in salvation. He is the one who calls, because he has set his love on us, and preserves us for everlasting fellowship with his Son.
 - b. Verse 4 refers to the hypocrites and false teachers in the visible church as “certain people” who “crept in unnoticed” but are nevertheless those “who long ago were designated for this condemnation.”¹² Notice that Jude does not say their actions or some particular condition was designated for condemnation but *specific people* who are presently alive at the time Jude is writing. This plainly implies the doctrine of reprobation, meaning that God has not just foreknown, but actually designated all those who will be condemned on the Day of Judgment.
 - i. The Reformed have traditionally been careful to distinguish here in the way God predestines each group. The Westminster Confession represents this by calling God’s predestination of believers an *appointing* unto eternal life, and his predestination of unbelievers a *passing by*.¹³ So this is double predestination, but it is not a predestination of each group in the same sense or by the same means.
 - ii. This avoids making God out to be the cause of the reprobate’s unbelief, as if he were forcing them to sin and reject him when they do not want to. God actively causes the regeneration and faith of believers, leading to their eternal destiny, but he passively allows the reprobate to continue on their natural path toward damnation.
 - c. The key difference between the visible church from the invisible church, then, is the work of God that he has predestined to apply only to some and not others. Those who are in the invisible church are predestined from before the foundation of the world to everlasting life, and therefore God is currently carrying out his methods to bring them to that glorious

¹¹ The Church will only be free of all her enemies within and without when Christ returns, brings the New Jerusalem down out of heaven as his bride, and “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” - Revelation 21:4

¹² Compare this verse with the parallel verse, 2 Peter 2:3, “Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.”

¹³ “As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore, they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power, through faith, unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only. The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice.” - WCF 3.6-7

future. Those who have been predestined to damnation can only remain in the visible church, never entering the invisible.

- d. The reason Jude refers to predestination in this way throughout his letter is not to frighten, but actually to comfort the elect.
 - i. If you trust in Christ alone and love his Gospel, you can be assured that you are predestined to be “kept for Jesus Christ” and that God is sovereign even over those who are harassing and undermining true churches.¹⁴ We may not be able to see the rot in these whitewashed tombs among us, but God can and does. He cannot be caught off guard by them, because he has already ordered the course of their steps from his eternal throne.
 - ii. Jude’s astronomical metaphor in verse 13 illustrates this well. To ancient observers, the planets seemed to be “wandering stars” because they do not follow the same fixed pattern as the constellations that all move together. Therefore we should think of the elect as those stars that endure and remain constant forever, whereas the reprobate appear like the others for a time but soon vanish into everlasting darkness.

Conclusion: From our perspective, we see the many scandals that plague Christ’s churches, both close to home and across our country, and we are discouraged. We painfully feel this tension between the visible and invisible church and want it to be resolved now rather than wait on the Lord. But waiting on him is exactly what God has asked us to do, even as he gives us encouragement through Jude from two main arguments. First, that it has always been this way with the people of God, and if he preserved the saints in the time of Abel, Abraham, and Elijah he will surely do so now with us.¹⁵ Second, God has foreordained all that comes to pass, including the whole lives and destinies of both the elect and the reprobate. If you truly know and trust in Jesus Christ as your own Savior, not all the heretics and hypocrites in the world can drag you down. Jude’s doxology is designed to give exactly this kind of comfort: “Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.”

¹⁴ Consider how Paul encourages believers in the same way in Ephesians 1:11-12: “In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.” Predestination is meant to encourage true Christians that they will certainly make it to the end and not abandon the faith.

¹⁵ One of my favorite hymns is The Church’s One Foundation, the fourth verse of which goes, “The church shall never perish! Her dear Lord to defend, to guide, sustain, and cherish, is with her to the end; though there be those that hate her, and false sons in her pale, against the foe or traitor she ever shall prevail.”