

We Can Understand the Bible...Alike!

Paul, as he wrote to Timothy, encouraged him in studying the word of God. In one of his most well known passages of scripture, Paul wrote:

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15, KJV).

Paul's instructions to Timothy emphasize the need to spend time with God's word. Some of the more modern translations, such as the New King James, translate Paul's instructions in this way:

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

This helps us to understand the process by which God expects us to become "approved" before Him. Understanding His word is not something that happens by mere good fortune. It takes diligent work! It takes *study*!

There has been, historically, a false premise set forth declaring that the Bible cannot really be understood. In times past, some religious leaders have acted as if the word of God is really only understandable to the elite, their clergy. While that idea has been combated over time, newer doctrines have developed that have challenged many people's belief that they can read and understand the word of God for themselves. Many religious bodies teach that people can only understand God's word if they somehow miraculously open their hearts and minds to that word. This does two things. First, it makes the revealed word practically useless. After all, if it takes a miraculous revelation to open the words of God for the common man, then why have it at all? Why not just have the miraculous operation? Second, it makes many people ignore God's revelation. If you have been convinced that you cannot understand God's word until there is some miraculous operation, and you have not "felt" that miraculous operation, then there is no reason to even try to understand God's word. Both of these problems are exposed when we actually look at God's word and the instructions that it provides. While we will explore these ideas later in our study, it is prudent to point out at this juncture that the word of God actually addresses the manner in which faith is attained, and it is not through a direct, miraculous operation by God on the heart of the believer:

How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "LORD, who has believed our report?" So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Romans 10:14–17).

The process that God has set in place for gaining faith is through listening to His word. Sometimes that may mean that others will help to explain the word, but it is not beyond the understanding of any person of sound mind. As we begin this study that is focused on how we study the Bible, it is important for us to know that we can come to an understanding! We will be looking at the expectations that God has for us, based upon what He has given to us. God has communicated His mind with us through His inspired writers. We can understand it, and we can all understand it alike!

Communication...

One of the first things that we have to recognize if we are to understand the Bible is that the written word is indeed God's communication with mankind. When we read the Bible, we should realize that the same basic principles of communication apply to it as we find in every other aspect of our lives. We understand what is written in scripture just as we understand what is written in any other type of book. When we sit down to study, for example, a history book, we know that the author wrote the information in such a manner as to convey what was in his mind to our minds. God's written word is intended to accomplish the same thing. Communication is the process by which the ideas in one person's mind are conveyed to be understood in the mind of another.

The apostle Paul addressed this very idea in Ephesians 3:1-13. There, he wrote about the process of revelation. He said that by revelation, the mystery of Christ was made known to him. How was that revelation presented? Paul said that the Holy Spirit revealed it through the apostles and prophets. In 1 Corinthians 2:9-16, Paul also addressed this idea. There, Paul declared that it is the Holy Spirit who searches out the things of the mind of God, and reveals it to His apostles and prophets. This is the message of the gospel revealed for us! God has provided the things that we need, and He expects that we are going to be obedient to His word:

"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29).

God has revealed what we have been given for a reason. Has He revealed everything about Himself, His domain, or the spiritual realm? Of course not. We could not comprehend much of that even if God did reveal it. He has revealed what we need to know. He has given us all things that pertain to "life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:1-4). He has provided enough information for us to live in this life the way He expects us to live so that we can have eternal life in the hereafter.

Returning to Ephesians 3, we can see that God intended for this revelation to be understood. Paul, speaking of the communication process, said that the Holy Spirit revealed the mystery to him, and that when the Ephesians read what he wrote, they would "understand [his] knowledge in the mystery of Christ..." (Ephesians 3:4). Later, Paul said that this revelation was given "to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church..." (Ephesians 3:10). Through the revelation, we can have the knowledge of Christ, and wisdom of God!

Does this mean that everything revealed is easy to understand? No, it does not. In fact, we are told that there are things in the scripture that are very difficult to understand. Peter wrote the following concerning the teachings of Paul:

Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures (2 Peter 3:14–16).

This is why the inspired writer of Hebrews could make a distinction between *milk* and *solid food* as it relates to the oracles of God (Hebrews 5:12-14). There are some things from the word of God that are easier, yet necessary for the one who is a babe in Christ. Then, there are things that are far more difficult to grasp, and are therefore suitable for those who have grown in such a way as to be able to understand them. Peter used similar terminology to describe this growth and understanding process (1 Peter 2:1-3).

For successful communication to occur, the one who is receiving the message must understand it as it is in the mind of the one giving the message. If I am describing how I want a particular job completed, I have not been successful in communicating with an employee until he understands what I want. As an employer, I will not be pleased with the work of my staff if they fail to accomplish the work I assign them in the way I want it done! I must communicate my desires to them in a manner that they can understand. God has, as Paul wrote, revealed His mind for us, so that we can understand the mystery of Christ! He has sent His message so that we can understand what He expects of us. He has *communicated* with us! Having done so, He expects that we will work to understand that communication as He has delivered it. Until we understand God's word in our minds as He delivered it from His, we have much work to do. Of course, this will be a life long endeavor. Paul himself made it clear that he had to continually work toward the prize so that he did not fall short:

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified (1 Corinthians 9:24–27).

All of this leads us to the conclusion that God has made it possible for us to understand His word. If there is a failure to understand, it is not on the part of God, or His revealed word. The fault can only lie with us. We have done something that obscures our understanding of the word that has been delivered. We may be so hardened by sin that we just simply refuse to listen to what God has said on a matter (2 Thessalonians 1:1-12). Such a problem can only be fixed by correcting our heart, or attitude. We have to want to understand the will of the Lord, or else we will never come to understanding. Another possible reason for a lack of understanding is that something is amiss in our process of gaining the needed information. Perhaps we have not grown enough to gather enough information to come to a full understanding of a particular topic. Perhaps we have not learned how to take the written word and process it in such a way as to draw out the conclusions that God expects of us. Our study, moving forward, will focus on this last idea. If we have the right attitudes concerning the word of God, then learning how to study it will open our understanding into the very mind of God (at least to the extent He has revealed His mind)!

Can We Really Understand the Word of God Alike?

With the plethora of denominations that identify as "Christian," it seems that understanding the word of God alike is a fantasy dream. There are many who see no reason to even try to understand things alike. They believe that there is no absolute truth, and studying the Bible is more about feeling good about one's self than it is about pleasing God. They believe that everyone will make it to heaven, regardless of what they believe about the Bible, so there is no incentive to study with others to either evaluate their own beliefs, or to convince others.

When we look at what God has to say through His revealed word, we quickly find that accepting differing beliefs concerning that word is not supported. To the contrary, God calls for unity of faith and practice among those who are His people. To accept something less is not from God, but rather accepting the practices of the world. Consider Paul's call for unity:

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. (1 Corinthians 1:10)

Paul would continue in that chapter to rebuke the Corinthians for their denominational mindset.

They had begun to divide up, calling themselves by the names of the men they followed:

Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:12–13)

We read of this division in the first century, and see the reprimand that accompanies it, and yet there are many who believe the divisions today to be acceptable to God! One of the underlying themes of the epistle to the Philippian brethren is the need to maintain unity:

Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel... (Philippians 1:27)

Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind (Philippians 2:1–2).

If God did not approve of that division in the first century, He surely does not approve of it today either! This tells us that everyone can understand the word of God alike. There is only one right way of understanding something that God has delivered to us. If we do not agree on what God has said, then the fault lies with us. We must continue to “be diligent” to understand what God has revealed. We cannot merely accept contrary positions as if both can be correct! Remember, we must come to understand each doctrine and teaching as it originated in the mind of God. We cannot conform it to what we desire!

For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain. And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:16–21).

Moving Forward...

As we move forward with our study, we will be working toward understanding how we can understand the scriptures in the way that God has revealed them. We will be trying examining how to truly understand what was in the mind of God, by understanding what He revealed to us. Only by getting to the point that we understand scripture as God wants us to understand it can we possibly have any hope of coming to unity of both faith and practice. God wants for us to have no divisions among us. We can only achieve that by studying His word diligently, and then conforming ourselves to the truths contained therein.

There will be many challenges set forth throughout this study. These challenges should help us to be strengthened in our faith, strengthened in our ability to defend those things that we believe. The process that we work through will, Lord willing, provide a strong foundation for examining every scripture and doctrine that we can encounter, and determine just what God’s will for us is. That does not mean that we will be perfect in our understanding all the time. But, by being diligent, and being willing to constantly evaluate our beliefs and practices by the standard of the scriptures, we will ever be improving ourselves and our service before the Lord!

Questions...

1. What did Paul mean when he encouraged Timothy to “Study to shew thyself approved unto God...”?
2. How is faith developed? How might one be helped by another person in the process of developing this faith?
3. What is needed for effective communication to take place?
4. Describe the revelation process as revealed by Paul in Ephesians chapter 3.
5. What is the difference between *milk* and *solid food* as it applies to Bible study?
6. What might keep us from understanding the will of God as He would have us to?
7. Is it possible for us to understand God’s word? Is it possible for every honest person to come to the same understanding of the word of God?
8. Is God pleased with religious division? How can division be avoided?

