

Finding God Through His Word

M. W. Bassford, 1-2-11

In the religious world today, there is all sorts of confusion. There are dozens of different churches represented in the Joliet area alone, and none of those churches teach the same thing. However, if you were to visit those churches and talk to the priest or pastor or whoever, every single one of them would insist that they are following the will of Jesus. How can that be? We learn from John 17 that Jesus wants His people to be one just as He and the Father are one, and yet, all of these people who claim to be His followers are just as squabbling and disunited as they can be. This is the opposite of what Jesus wanted. All those different churches can be in the wrong, but they can't all be right.

What, then, are we to do about it? Not a church out there will tell us, "No, we're not obedient to Jesus. You'd better try that other church down the street." Nor can we use our people-reading skills to determine who's telling us the truth. All of those people in all of those different churches sincerely believe that they're doing what God wants.

The only way for us to escape all this religious confusion is to find some standard that we can use to compare the different churches. In the other areas of our lives, this is something that we do all the time. For example, I'm in the middle of remodeling my bathroom right now. If I want to cut a piece of tile to be six inches long, how do I do that? Do I call up all my friends and have them come over and let all of them guess at how long six inches is? Of course not! I get out my measuring tape, measure six inches, and that's that. I settle the question by referring to the standard.

We can settle our religious questions in just the same way—by reference to the standard of the word of God. All of our different opinions don't matter a lick, but the Scripture does. Let's look, then, at finding God through His word.

Validating the Standard

As we do this, though, we first have to spend some time validating the standard. Back when I was in college, I worked in a scientific lab analyzing plant samples. I did this by running them through a machine. However, before I analyzed the very first sample, I had to spend some time warming up and calibrating the machine, so that I could be sure it would give me an accurate reading. In the same way, we need to make sure that the Bible is going to be accurate, that it's more than just a work of human wisdom, that it actually will give us the divine standard we're looking for.

The Bible itself testifies that it is this standard in 2 Peter 1:20-21. If we want to understand this verse, we need to understand something about the way the Bible uses the word "prophecy". When the Bible talks about prophets and prophecy, it isn't just talking about men who predict the future, although they are included. Instead, in Bible terms, any man who reveals God's will is a prophet, and his revelation is a prophecy.

This passage, then, doesn't just apply to the parts of the Bible that predict the future. Instead, it applies to the entire Bible, and it says that everything between the two covers of the book is the product not of the will of man, but of the will of God. As a result, we can rely on the Bible to faithfully repeat to us what God wants us to know.

This isn't true in just a broad sense, either. God didn't give the inspired men a vague sense of what He wanted them to say, and then let them fill in the details. Instead, every word in Scripture is the word that God wanted it to be. We learn this from 1 Corinthians 2:12-13. When we read a verse in the Bible, those words aren't taught by human wisdom. They are taught by the Holy Spirit. This means that we can and should pay attention to everything in the word, from its largest themes to its smallest details, and use everything to determine what God wants us to do.

Understanding the Standard.

So, then, we see that the Bible is a valid standard, that if we read it and understand it, we can learn God's will from it. That leaves open the question, though, of whether we actually can understand it. Lots of churches out there say that the average worshiper in the pew cannot, in fact, understand the Bible. They teach that you have to be a member of the clergy or have special training to understand it, and that laypeople would only get confused if they tried to read the Bible on their own. Now, I'm not going to question anybody's motives on that, but I will say that if my church didn't follow what the Bible taught, then I would try to discourage everybody from reading the Bible too.

Are those people right, though? Is it really impossible for ordinary Joe Blow to understand the Bible, even if he wants to? Actually, that's the opposite of what the apostle Paul says. Let's look together at what he wrote in Ephesians 3:4. Now remember: Paul isn't writing here to some collection of religious dignitaries. He's writing to ordinary Christians, the members of the church in Ephesus. He tells them that once they get his letter, they can read it, and they can understand the point that he's trying to get across. Friends, we have the same God-given gifts that those Ephesians did 2000 years ago. That means that we can sit down, open the word, and understand it just like they could. This is not always going to be easy. Some parts of the Bible are more understandable than others. However, it is always possible.

In fact, this kind of study of the word is exactly what God wants to encourage. We learn this from the approving comment of Acts 17:10-11. Here, we learn that compared to the people of Thessalonica, the people of this ancient city called Berea were nobler-minded. This doesn't mean that they walked around with their noses in the air all the time. Instead, it means that they had their minds set on things that were pure and holy. They revealed this noble mindset by the way that they responded to Paul's preaching. They didn't just reject it out of hand. They didn't even accept it blindly. What they did is they opened the Scripture and they searched through it to learn if Paul was telling the truth.

That's exactly the way that God wants us to be. There are all kinds of religious teachers who teach all kinds of different things. The only way for us to determine if they're telling the truth or not is by comparing their message to the standard of the word, just like I might compare a tile to the six-inch line on the tape measure. If the word of God agrees with and confirms what they're saying, they're telling the truth, and we should put that message into practice in our own lives. On the other hand, if we open the book, and we find that it says something different from what they're saying, then they are not telling the truth. It doesn't matter whether they've got a fancy outfit, a big church building, and thousands of followers. If their teaching doesn't line up with the standard, it isn't what God wants us to do. Period.

Learning from the Standard.

Now that we know what the standard is and that we can use it, we must ask what we can learn from it. After all, most standards aren't good for everything. I can certainly use my tape measure to determine how long six inches is, but if I want to know how much a pint of water is, my tape measure isn't going to be of much help.

In just the same way, the Bible is intended to teach us about certain things. For instance, it teaches us **ABOUT GOD**. The apostle John makes this point clear in John 20:30-31. Neither John nor any of the other gospels claim to be a complete record of every time Jesus scratched His nose. However, John does say that his gospel gives the honest man enough evidence to believe that Jesus is the Son of God. If we're honest, and we study the gospel of John from beginning to end, it will persuade us too. Other parts of the Bible tell us more about Jesus or about God the Father, and when we put them all together, they tell us all that God wants for us to know. Without the Bible, there's no other way to come to that knowledge. Every other source that claims to inform us about God is either getting that information from the Scripture or is lying. If we believe in Jesus at all, the only legitimate foundation for that faith is the word of God.

Second, the word teaches us **ABOUT SALVATION**. Paul makes this clear in Romans 1:16. In the Christian sphere, there's basic agreement that we are sinners, and that we need God to save us from our sins. However, from that point, opinions vary widely. Some teach that you can be saved by being sprinkled as an infant, by praying the sinner's prayer, by speaking in tongues, or by doing nothing at all because God decided you were one of the lucky ones before you were even born. We could fill a library with the volumes defending each of those theories, but you know what? None of that matters, not even a little bit. We're not the ones who decide how we are to be saved from our sins. God has already decided that. It's His right as the One who is doing the saving, and He has revealed His plan of salvation in His word. If we want to be reconciled with God, we have to learn about that plan from the Scripture, and we have to follow it. If we refuse either to learn or to follow, then we have no hope on the day of judgment. It's either God's way or the highway.

Third, we can learn from the standard of the word **ABOUT GOOD WORKS**. This is most famously articulated by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Here, Paul reaffirms the divine inspiration of Scripture, just as we saw earlier. However, he doesn't only say that the Scripture is from God. He also says that it's comprehensive, that it tells us everything God wants us to know. When we take all of the Scripture together, it completes us and equips us for every good work.

This means that there is nothing we need to complete us as disciples of Christ that is not in the Bible. There is no good work that is not in the Bible. If the Bible doesn't mention something at least in principle, it is not a good work. This is critically important, both individually and congregationally. It means that if we want to do good in either case, we must confine ourselves to following the Bible. There are all kinds of churches who don't do this. They start doing this work and that work and the other work, under the sincere impression that those are good things to do. However, friends, when we start going beyond the Scripture, we're leaving God's standard behind. We may not realize it, but we're actually saying to Him that we think we're better judges of what makes a good work than He is. Let's stick with the Scripture.

Finally, the Bible instructs us **ABOUT ETERNAL LIFE**. This is clear from Paul's words in Acts 20:32. Only the Bible is able to build us up as Christians—that's the good works part we looked at just a moment ago—but it is also true that only the Bible is able to give us an inheritance with the saints in heaven. I've talked to a lot of people about religion in my day, but I have yet to hear anyone express the desire to go to hell. I daresay that everyone in this room this morning wants to go to heaven. If that's our desire, friends, the Bible is the only way for us to get there. It tells us about our Savior, Jesus Christ, it tells us about how we must be saved from our sins, it tells us about godly Christian living, and it promises us that if we faithfully follow its commandments, we will reign with the Lord forever. What we do with that information is up to us, but if we follow anything other than the word, we will surely be lost. How horrible it would be to spend eternity apart from God, knowing that we too could have been saved if only we had listened and obeyed!