

Who Can Understand the Bible?

by Timothy R. Nichols

Introduction

A while ago a friend called me long-distance. “Tim, I’m looking for some devotional reading, and the stuff they have down at the Christian bookstore is too basic and fluffy. I need something more substantial. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Sure,” I told her. “I’m going to go out on a limb and suggest that you read the Bible.” After a comment like that, it is usually advisable to do some fast talking, so I did. “I’m sure you’ve already tried that or you wouldn’t be talking to me, so I’m guessing that your response will be something like ‘I tried reading the Bible, but I don’t understand it.’ Am I right?”

I was. We talked some more, and I made some suggestions. She started working with those, but within a few weeks the Lord brought along a much better training opportunity for her than I was able to offer from a distance. In a relatively short time, she had progressed from being unable to understand the Bible herself to being able to study the Bible effectively and help others understand it as well.

My friend’s situation was better than that of most American Christians. She was intelligent, very well educated, and had decades of solid Bible teaching. And yet, despite these clear advantages, she thought that she could not understand the Bible.

Unfortunately, she is far from unique. Many people, believers and unbelievers alike, have fallen prey to myths that keep them from the Word. In the next few pages, we will look at some of these myths in more detail and see, from the Scriptures, why they are not true.

Five Myths about Understanding the Bible

Myth #1: Only Scholars Can Understand the Bible

At its most basic, this myth appeals to the fact that normal people do not know Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic; they do not know the culture and customs of Bible times; they do not have a firm grasp on the historical context. Without these things, it is said, they simply cannot understand the Bible. In a more liberal form, the myth will add that the stories in the Bible, particularly the miracle stories, did not really happen that way—they are there only to make a spiritual point. But, of course, the common people are not ready to hear this sort of thing; they are not prepared to understand that the purpose of Scripture is not historical but ethical. So the Bible should be left to the scholars.

Myth #2: Only Pastors and Teachers Can Understand the Bible

This myth is close kin to the first one. It claims that unlike laymen, the pastor usually has the knowledge of biblical languages, cultures, and historical contexts. But the myth usually goes further than that. Underlying it is the idea that believers who do not have pastoring and teaching gifts are intended to understand Bible doctrine only from the teaching they receive, not directly from the Bible.

Myth #3: Only Believers Can Understand the Bible

Many believers, even those who know better, find this myth useful in apologetic contexts. When an unbeliever points out a seeming contradiction or problem in the Bible, the believer can just respond, “Oh, he’s just an unbeliever. Of course, he doesn’t understand the Bible—how could he?” This does not answer the objection the unbeliever has raised, but many a believer has dodged a serious conversation by means of this chestnut. They can then move in more comfortable directions, like an enumeration of all the assets believers have that unbelievers do not: the indwelling Holy Spirit, reconciliation with God, forgiveness of sins, and so on. Without all these things, the reasoning goes, clearly, the unbeliever has no hope of understanding the Bible.

Myth #4: Only Believers Who Are Walking by the Holy Spirit Can Understand the Bible

Like the previous myth, this one extends the fog of inevitable misunderstanding from unbelievers to carnal believers. The argument runs similarly: a believer who is not actually taking advantage of the assets the Lord has given him cannot understand the Bible. Sure, he *has* the Holy Spirit, but he quenches the Spirit, so how can the Spirit help him? Sure, he is forgiven and reconciled, but he persists in living as though he were not. And so on.

Myth #5: Anyone Can Understand the Bible—Any Way He Wants!

If the other myths try to close doors that should be left open, this one tries to open the doors, knock down the walls, and tear off the roof. Of course, Paul had something in particular in mind when he wrote Galatians, the argument goes, but who knows what it was? That meaning was in Paul’s head, and it meant a lot to him, but we don’t have access to Paul’s head, do we? All we have is the text he wrote, and language is a terribly ambiguous and slippery thing; you can never really tell what it means. So the text can be read in a lot of different ways, and who knows which way he meant it? The far more interesting question, these folks will say, is what happens in your own head when you read Galatians. What is *your* experience of Galatians? And, of

course, everyone's experience will be different, but that's okay: the only thing that matters is what it "means" *to you*.

Building a Foundation for Understanding the Bible

In order to build a biblical case against the myths listed above, we first need to examine what the Bible says about itself. Conservative doctrinal statements often summarize the Bible's claims about itself with the statement that the Bible is "the only authoritative guide for faith and practice." This wording is chosen carefully. "Only" expresses the Bible's uniqueness; the propositional revelation of God is available nowhere but in the pages of the Bible. "Authoritative" sets the Bible above every other standard. "Guide" addresses the Bible's role in the lives of believers: it illuminates our world and shows us what to do. "For faith and practice" tells us in what areas of life the Bible operates: all of them, both what we believe and what we do. This impressive claim implies that the Bible contains a certain meaning, and that meaning is accessible. After all, how could the Book profitably "guide" someone's belief or behavior if it can mean anything, or if it is not understandable?

The doctrinal formulation "the only authoritative guide for faith and practice" is not some arbitrary claim foisted on an unsuspecting book by an overly enthusiastic public. The Bible claims this status for itself in a number of places. Consider 2 Timothy 3:16–17, for example: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, in order that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

"God-breathed" claims that God is the source of Scripture. What source can claim unique authority more than the Maker of the universe? "Profitable" tells us that the Bible has uses to which it can be applied. And what are these uses? "Doctrine," teaching; "reproof," pointing out error; "correction," recovering from error and returning to the Lord; "instruction in righteousness," continuing growth in the Christian way of life. And what is the purpose of these four activities? "In order that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." As a young pastor, Timothy needs to shepherd the congregation God has entrusted to him, and in order to do that, he needs the right tools. Paul tells him that Scripture is one of the proper tools for every part of the Christian life and that as he employs Scripture to fulfill its functions, he will be "thoroughly equipped for every good work."

As with the doctrinal formulation that derives from it, 2 Timothy 3:16–17 implies that Scripture has a meaning and is understandable. Scripture can hardly be profitable for teaching if it has no meaning or the meaning is incommunicable, since no real teaching has transpired until meaning has passed from teacher to student. Scripture cannot be profitable for reproof

unless those in error, who need rebuking—unbelievers included—can understand the rebuke it offers to them. Scripture cannot be profitable for correction unless a sinner can learn from it how to return to the Lord. Scripture cannot be profitable for instruction in righteousness unless believers can learn from it how to grow in the Lord.

On these two verses alone, it is possible to establish that all of the myths mentioned above are incorrect. But let us examine more closely some of the other things Scripture says about itself.

Language and Reality¹

A common presupposition in discussions about Scripture is that language and reality just do not meet, that linguistic attempts to describe reality are inherently inept and fallacious. If language were invented by primates who had only recently given up trees and bananas in favor of bipedal locomotion and life on the African savannah, then this might have been true. There certainly is no particular reason to believe that the howling, grunting, and gibbering of former monkeys should be an adequate tool for describing the universe.

Related to this claim is the notion that a statement in one language cannot accurately be rendered in another. Again, if language were a human construction with no inherent link to reality, then this could have well been true. All language really describes is a picture in the speaker's head, and there is no particular reason to suppose that the picture can be transferred even to another speaker of the same language, let alone translated into another language. But what if the evolutionary picture of history is a pack of pagan lies? What then?

Genesis 1–3

The first few chapters of Genesis offer a view of history that sharply differs from the evolutionary picture, and the biblical history has a profound effect on our view of language.

Divine Language Creates. A careful reader progresses all the way to the third verse of the Bible before encountering language in the biblical narrative: “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”²

God *speaks* the light into existence. He *creates* something in the physical universe with language. And there is a correspondence between the language God uses and the thing which comes into being. The text does not say, “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there were a variety of shades of gray, some

¹ Many thanks to Charles Clough, whose *Biblical Framework* series (available at www.cclough.com) inspired this line of research.

² Gen. 1:3.

very much like light and some very much like darkness, with a lot of variation in between.” God commanded that there be light, and there it was: light. And the same thing is true in the remaining five days: when God calls a thing into existence, it suddenly exists. So divine language created the universe, and there is a one-to-one correspondence between the language and the reality.³

Divine Language Gives Names for the First Three Days. In Genesis 1:5, God does something different with language: “And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night.” This is not creation; the things God is talking about here have already been created. Now God is naming the creation. He continues to do this in the second and third day, naming Heaven (i.e., the sky), Earth (the dry land), and Seas. Then, with no reason given, God ceases to name.

Divine Language Describes. Genesis 1:26 brings another use of language to the fore: “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’”

Here God is not yet creating. The members of the Godhead are discussing the creative activity that is about to take place. Notice the correspondence between the description of the creation, as they discuss it, and the creation itself. Divine language not only calls the universe into being and names its elements, but also describes it accurately. This same phenomenon occurs later in Genesis 2:18 as well.

Divine Language Communicates to Man. After Man had been formed from the dust and before God had yet made Woman from the Man, God gives Man a command: “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’”

If Adam had not understood the command, that would have been the best possible excuse when God asked him if he had broken it: “Oh, you meant *that* tree? I thought you were talking about *this* one, over here!” As Adam’s blame shifting demonstrates, he understood the command.⁴

Human Language Gives Names. On the sixth day, naming resumes, but God is not the one naming: “Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast

³ Divine language also continues to sustain the universe even now: Heb. 1:3 tells us that Christ is “upholding all things by the word of His power.”

⁴ The New Testament record also confirms that Adam sinned knowingly, which implies that he understood the command (Rom. 5:13–14, 1 Tim. 2:14).

of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them. And whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name. So Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him.”⁵

As God has named the basic elements of the environment (light and darkness, heaven, earth, and sea), so God now calls on Adam to name the animals that will be his companions. This is not a simple case of Adam walking through the garden assigning random sounds to different creatures. How do we know? Because Adam finds no helper comparable to himself. As Adam names the animals, he is examining them to see whether they are like him, and he finds no one that qualifies.

Human Language Gives Names Based on Description. Scripture only records one of the names that Adam gives. After Adam’s unsuccessful hunt for a suitable companion, God causes him to sleep and, from his rib, creates Eve. God then wakes Adam and brings Eve to him. Scripture records Adam’s response:

And Adam said:
 “This is now bone of my bones
 And flesh of my flesh;
 She shall be called Woman,
 Because she was taken out of Man.”⁶

That’s right—he did it in poetry. So on the very first day of his existence, Adam was a sophisticated language user. This highlights the fact that language is not a human invention but a divine gift. God had it—and used it—first, and later gave it to Adam to use as well.

In English, the feminine form of certain words can be formed by adding *-ess* to the end (e.g., actor, actress; baron, baroness). Similarly, Hebrew makes a masculine root word feminine by adding *-ah*. The Hebrew word for “Man” that Adam uses here is *ish*. The name “Woman,” (Hebrew *ishah*) is technically not related to the word for “Man”; the two words do not derive from the same root. However, they *sound* like masculine and feminine versions of the same word. In other words, Adam makes a pun which implies that she is the female version of himself.⁷

Notice also the rationale for naming Woman. Adam recognizes her not just as “a helper comparable to” him, but as his own body, his bones and his flesh. So when Adam names her Woman, he is doing so because he

⁵ Gen. 2:19–20.

⁶ Gen. 2:23.

⁷ Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 127.

recognizes the reality of who and what she is, and he describes, and names, her accordingly.

Divine Language Communicates to Man and Woman. Having made Man and Woman, God speaks to them:

Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” And God said, “See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is life, I have given every green herb for food.”⁸

Both of them understood this communication from God, as the Woman later demonstrates in her conversation with Satan.

Satan’s Use of Language. The third chapter of Genesis introduces a new use for language: deceit. The serpent’s use of language here is the prototypical lie, the first occurrence of such a thing in human history. As such it deserves a much closer examination than this article can give it. For the present purpose, it is sufficient to notice that this is the first case in human history where a use of language fails to correspond to reality.⁹ Even here, the lie includes much truth (compare Genesis 3:5 with 3:7, 22).

Language after the Fall. After the Fall, both Man and Woman used language in ways similar to the serpent. (Let it never be said that humanity is slow to adapt to depravity!) God challenges Man about his rebellion, but instead of taking responsibility, Man tries to shift the blame to God and Woman. Woman, in turn, tries to shift the blame to the serpent.

Notice, however, that in spite of sin, language communicates admirably well. When God called for Adam in the garden, Adam understood Him. When God challenged their disobedience, both Man and Woman understood Him clearly.

Everything gets harder after the Fall. God had given Adam the responsibility to tend and keep the garden, to cultivate the land responsibly. Adam retains this responsibility after the Fall, but now the earth rebels against his efforts. God had told the first couple to be fruitful and multiply before the Fall, but now childbirth will be painful and difficult.

⁸ Gen. 1:28–30.

⁹ Satan’s false predictions about his destiny are chronologically prior (Isa. 14:13–14). But while relevant to human history, that incident is not properly a part of human history, since humanity was not directly involved.

Likewise, language use gets more difficult after the Fall. Before the Fall, human language had only one use: to reveal the truth. After the Fall, human language becomes a tool for concealing the truth as well. And yet even in the presence of sin, God can still communicate His truth to humanity, as the conversation in Genesis 3:9–19 demonstrates.

Language after Babel

Babel introduced a further hindrance to communication: multiple languages. Some time after Babel, God chose Hebrew as the vehicle for written revelation. Had God continued to stick with one language, one might justifiably maintain—as the Muslims do vis-à-vis Arabic—that in order to truly comprehend God’s truth, one must learn that language. But God did not do this. Even within the Old Testament, there are a few sections written, not in Hebrew, but in Aramaic. God goes on to demonstrate that revelation is far from monolingual.

In due time, Jews scattered throughout the Mediterranean world lost their Hebrew language, but still needed to be able to read their Scriptures, so the Old Testament was translated. The result was the Greek Old Testament, commonly known as the Septuagint.

As translations go, the Septuagint was serviceable in most places, but the quality was uneven. However, the New Testament authors had no qualms about using it where it was appropriate to do so. And the New Testament authors, of course, were writing in Greek—a third language chosen by God as a vehicle for written revelation.

On these facts alone, God directly uses three different languages, and by quoting Septuagint in the New Testament, effectively sanctions human translation of Scripture.

But shortly before any of the New Testament books were written, something even more drastic took place. On the feast of Pentecost following the ascension of Christ, the apostles and other believers were gathered together and were suddenly filled by the Holy Spirit. Acts records what happened next:

And they . . . began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, “Look, are not all these who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining

Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God.”¹⁰

The “wonderful works of God” can be expressed by sinful men, to sinful men, in any language. This is so because *language and reality connect*. The reality we are discussing, the universe itself, was spoken into existence with language, and is sustained by language. The things in it are named and accurately described, first by God and then by man, with language. The Fall introduced deception, an abuse of language, and Babel introduced a multiplicity of languages. But these hurdles can be overcome because they do not fundamentally alter the nature of language itself.

The Addressees of Scripture

Given that it is possible to communicate God’s revelation to man through language, the next question is, To whom does God speak? To answer this question effectively, we must take seriously the characteristics that Scripture itself attributes to its addressees.

A great portion of the New Testament addresses ordinary people who were messing up their lives somehow. As we’ll see below, some of them had moral problems—sexual immorality, laziness, fraud, murder—while others had doctrinal problems. Some were stagnant believers; some were unbelievers. First Timothy 3:16 directly states that Scripture is profitable for reproof. In order for this to be true, people who need reproof—be it doctrinally or morally—must be capable of understanding it.

Morally Bankrupt Believers Can Understand Scripture. The addressees of the Corinthian epistles are not exactly model Christians. In fact, Paul directly addresses their carnality: “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and another, ‘I am of Apollos,’ are you not carnal?”¹¹

Paul rebukes their carnality in the expectation that they will hear the rebuke and improve. The whole book rests on the premise that the carnal believers who need this rebuke will be able to understand and benefit from it.

Doctrinally Bankrupt Believers Can Understand Scripture. There is no issue more important to Christians than the gospel itself. A Christian who goes

¹⁰ Acts 2:4–11.

¹¹ 1 Cor. 3:1–4.

wrong there is apt to go wrong anywhere at all. Paul addresses an entire book to just such an audience. Immediately after the opening salutation, where he identifies himself and his audience, Paul writes, “I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel.”¹²

Paul devotes the rest of the book to correcting this problem. In order for the rebuke to be true, the readers must have, in fact, abandoned the gospel of Christ. And in order for the rebuke to be effective—which Paul plainly expects, or why write at all?—they have to be able to understand it and profit from it.

Stagnant Believers Can Understand Scripture. The author of Hebrews addresses believers with a different problem. His audience does not seem to have particularly strong moral problems, nor are they guilty—yet—of doctrinal defection. They began their Christian lives on a solid foundation of faith and virtue, as the author reminds them:

But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward.¹³

However, rather than continuing to build on that good start, the addressees have stagnated and, by failing to grow, have atrophied to the point where they need repeat lessons: “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.”¹⁴

The author is clearly not satisfied with their condition and intends that they alter it. As he rebukes them and offers correction to return them to the proper path, he presupposes that they will be able to understand and profit from the letter.

Unbelievers Can Understand Scripture. The Bible does not only address believers. As he is drawing his Gospel to a close, John explains to his readers how he chose the eight signs¹⁵ that make up the book: “And truly Jesus did

¹² Gal. 1:6.

¹³ Heb. 10:32–35.

¹⁴ Heb. 5:12.

¹⁵ Commentators commonly understand John to have seven signs, but they have missed an important point. See John H. Niemelä, “The Message of Life in the Gospel of John,” *CTS Journal* 7 (July–September 2001): 2–20.

many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.”¹⁶

John chose these particular signs with a certain kind of reader in mind: a reader who does not have life because he does not believe that Jesus is the Christ. John intends that reading his accounts of these signs will persuade such a reader of the truth of his message, which will result in eternal life. In order for John’s purpose to be accomplished, it must be possible for an unbeliever to read John’s gospel and understand John’s message.

Moderating Considerations

Careful attention to the addressees of passages will refute the myth that only _____ (insert favored group here) can understand Scripture. We should be careful, however, not to go beyond the biblical evidence. The fact that certain people, formerly thought to be incapable of biblical understanding, are the target audiences of certain portions of Scripture does not mean that *everyone* can understand *the whole thing*. For example, John 20:30–31 demonstrates that an unbeliever can understand John; it makes no comment on whether an unbeliever can understand Luke, 1 Corinthians, or Revelation—all of which address believers.

The Extent of Understanding. Scripture does indicate that there is such a thing as advanced truth—doctrines which are for mature believers. Scripture does not directly say that others will be unable to understand them, but does say that they are not addressed to anyone else, for whatever reason.

Very early in the epistle, Paul reminds the Corinthians of his message and manner when he first came to Corinth:

And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.¹⁷

Paul’s manner of speaking was very simple, and so was his message. This simple message which Paul gave at the beginning, however, did not exhaust the content Paul *could* teach, as he explains in the very next verse: “However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this

¹⁶ John 20:30–31.

¹⁷ 1 Cor. 2:1–5.

age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”¹⁸

Here Paul points out a contrast. When he first came to the Corinthians, they were unbelievers, and then carnal believers, and he taught them a very simple message. But there is additional material, *wisdom* from God, which Paul teaches to mature believers.¹⁹ Man cannot achieve this wisdom on his own, Paul says; the Holy Spirit has to give it to him. Unlike man, the Holy Spirit is uniquely privy to the things of God. The natural²⁰ man cannot receive these things, but the spiritual man can. The Corinthians, however, are not spiritual, as Paul goes on to say, “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal.”²¹

Paul still cannot teach the Corinthians the *wisdom* that he teaches among the mature, because the Corinthians have remained carnal and failed to mature.

The author of Hebrews cites a similar issue in writing to his audience. He wants to teach them certain things, and it will be difficult, he says, because they have *become dull of hearing*.²² He goes on to explain: “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”²³ Like Paul, the author of Hebrews has important information he would like to share with his audience, but they are not ready for it.

Every passage does not address every person. However, God has not, on that account, abandoned everyone who is not yet able to grasp certain passages. Rather, the author of Hebrews also tells us, “But without faith it is

¹⁸ 1 Cor. 2:6–8.

¹⁹ Romans, for example, addresses a mature, productive congregation (see Rom. 1:7–8).

²⁰ Greek *psychikos*, literally *soulish*. Note that contrary to our common terminology, Paul’s argument here does not require that the *soulish* man be unsaved. The category could include carnal believers as well as unbelievers.

²¹ 1 Cor. 3:1–3a.

²² Heb. 5:11.

²³ Heb. 5:12–14.

impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”²⁴

God always rewards the diligent seeker. Therefore, believers and unbelievers alike can be confident that if they diligently seek the Lord, they will be able to understand whatever truth they need in order to continue growing closer to Him.

The Role of Teachers. What, then, is the role of teachers? If even unbelievers have certain portions of Scripture that they can understand, why have teachers at all? The premise behind the question is that God expends no more effort than necessary, that one mechanism to accomplish a goal is enough. But very often, this is not how God deals with mankind. Romans 1 and Psalm 19 tell us that *no one* is without God’s revelation. God could justly wait for pagans to respond to the revelation they already have in creation. Yet God does not do this; He pursues them. He has given His Word, and He has sent His people to carry it to the lost.²⁵

In preserving us from our sins, God could provide *just enough* grace, but God does not do this: “where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.”²⁶

When one believer offends another, God could make it incumbent on one party or the other to take the first step to reconcile the relationship. After all, only one person needs to make the first step. Surely, commanding the offended party to begin the process of reconciliation is sufficient. It might be sufficient, but this is not what God does: in separate places, He commands each party to initiate contact with the other.²⁷

Parsimony might be a general characteristic of nature (hence, Occam’s razor), but it does not characterize God’s dealings with humanity. With us, God is abundantly gracious. In our hardheartedness, we need this grace, and we would perish without it. And so it is in this area of understanding God’s Word. God hungers for mankind to hear His voice; He loves us and has wonderful plans for us, and we cannot be truly happy and contented apart from His plan for our lives. He is far more interested in telling us all this than we are in hearing it. And so as He does in so many other areas of our lives, God uses multiple mechanisms to bring His Word into our lives. As we have seen, portions of the Word are addressed to unbelievers, other portions to carnal believers with various sorts of problems, and other portions still to the mature. These books are meant to be understood by the people to whom they are addressed. However, this is by no means the sole mechanism by which God brings His Word to us. In addition, He has ordained fellowship as a

²⁴ Heb. 11:6.

²⁵ Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 1:8.

²⁶ Rom. 5:20.

²⁷ Matt. 5:23–24; 18:15.

means by which ordinary believers minister spiritual truth to each other.²⁸ And on top of that, Christ has given gifted teachers and pastors to the church to equip the saints for ministry.²⁹ Teachers and pastors are responsible for bringing people into contact with the Word. As Paul wrote to Timothy, “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.”³⁰

The fact that an individual can successfully engage the Word of God on his own does not remove the need for teaching any more than teaching removes the need for individual engagement. God has spoken on both subjects, and He requires both; it therefore behooves us to pursue both. One of the benefits of teaching is simple time management. Paul obliquely refers to this in his first letter to Timothy: “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages.’”³¹

In the context, “honor” refers to financial consideration; it could be accurately translated “honorarium.” The noteworthy issue for our study is the acknowledgement that among the elders who rule well, there are some who *labor* to exhaustion in their study of the Scriptures. These men are the ones most worthy of the church’s financial support, so they can devote their full attention to the task (as the apostles also did, see Acts 6:2–4). Part of a teacher’s role is to work harder and longer at the task than his students. A teacher may take 40 or 50 hours to gain an insight, only to teach it in a 60-minute lesson. This does not necessarily mean that the student *could not* have achieved the insight on his own, but given the demands of daily life, it might have taken him weeks or months to get it.

There is also the matter of skill in the Word. The properly ruling elder who labors in the Word has certain qualifications that Paul has already discussed earlier in the book.³² He is a mature believer, experienced in walking with the Lord, and able to teach. He will be able to help his less mature congregants learn the Word more rapidly and help them see

²⁸ Eph. 4:15, Heb. 3:12–13; 10:24–25. For further discussion of this point, see Timothy R. Nichols, “Beyond the Pulpit: Two Ways Ordinary Believers Minister to the Church,” *CTS Journal* 10 (Fall 2004): 32–42.

²⁹ Eph. 4:11–12.

³⁰ 2 Tim. 4:1–2.

³¹ 1 Tim. 5:17–18. For further discussion of this passage, see John H. Niemelä, “*Especially Those Who Labor in the Word*: 1 Timothy 5:17 and the Plurality of Elders,” *CTS Journal* 10 (Fall 2004): 64–73.

³² 1 Tim. 3:1–7.

applications that will enable them to grow more rapidly and thoroughly into maturity.

Revisiting the Myths

1 Timothy 3:16–17 requires that the people who need to hear a certain portion of Scripture be able to understand it. Such communication is possible because language is created by God and underlies the very existence of the universe. Even our sinfulness cannot remove language's ability to communicate. And this ability is demonstrated in Scripture, as different portions of Scripture are addressed to different audiences: unbelievers, immature believers, heretical believers, stagnant believers, and mature believers. With this in mind, let us revisit the five myths with which we began our study.

Myth #1: Only Scholars Can Understand the Bible

In fact, most of the Bible is addressed, not to scholars, but to common people. Even the language barrier does not sustain this myth, because Scripture shows us that accurate translation is not only possible, it is desirable. So although some skill in language might be required to do the translation, once the translation is done properly, ordinary people can understand the Word. After all, they are the addressees.

Myth #2: Only Pastors and Teachers Can Understand the Bible

Again, most of the Bible is not addressed to teachers and pastors, and clearly, the addressees are capable of understanding what is written to them. Pastors and teachers perform a necessary function in the church when they teach the Scriptures, but they are not the sole mediators of the Word of God.

Myth #3: Only Believers Can Understand the Bible

Although much of the Bible is addressed to believers, John's gospel specifically addresses unbelievers. Unbelievers can understand it.

Myth #4: Only Believers Who Are Walking by the Holy Spirit Can Understand the Bible

In fact, Scripture is profitable for rebuke, which means that those believers who need rebuking can understand it too. Indeed, whole books have been written for the explicit purpose of rebuking believers who were *not* walking by the Spirit and helping them to return to a proper Christian walk.

Myth #5: Anyone Can Understand the Bible—Any Way He Wants!

Language is not the impossibly ambiguous instrument that this myth claims it is. God created language, God used language to create and describe the universe, and then God gave language to man. Far from never quite meeting

reality, language is actually the substructure of reality, and consequently, effective communication is quite possible.

Of course, this myth is also greatly hampered by the fact that its own adherents do not really believe in it. Sitting around a table in the university coffee shop, the students may argue passionately that language has no meaning and communication is quite impossible. But when one of them goes up to the counter and orders a “large decaf mocha, hold the whipped cream,” he’s going to be annoyed if the barista serves him a small iced tea instead. And if the barista justifies the iced tea by saying, “Hey, man, that’s my personal interpretation of ‘large decaf mocha, hold the whipped cream.’ Why are you trying to impose your interpretation on me?” then the fur will *really* fly. So our university student’s claims about language are only a pose that allows him to avoid substantive discussion of important issues.

Getting Started

Perhaps, like my friend at the beginning of this article, you have tried in the past to understand your Bible and failed. Knowing that it *can* be done helps, to be sure, but there is still the matter of learning *how* to do it successfully. Let me encourage you to press forward. There are a number of resources designed to help with exactly this problem. Let me first suggest an earlier article I wrote for the *CTS Journal*, “Holding Center: The Theocentric Unity of Truth in the Postmodern World.”³³ The entire article may or may not interest you, but it contains a 4-page section on learning to read effectively. That will give you a rough but useful sketch of the process.

In addition, I would suggest you acquire a copy of Howard Hendricks’ *Living by the Book*.³⁴ It is a user-friendly introduction to basic Bible study. Most of the chapters are short enough to permit reading in snippets, a useful quality for folks who can’t carve out hours at a time to read. Roy B. Zuck’s *Basic Bible Interpretation*³⁵ is a similarly useful resource.

As fodder for your study, I would suggest the Bible. If you would like a little more guidance to start with, get Trevor McIlwain’s *Firm Foundations: Creation to Christ*.³⁶ In it, you will find an overall framework for studying through how God progressively revealed Himself to humanity. As the title suggests, the study covers the sweep of biblical history from creation to the ascension. McIlwain designed these lessons for unbelievers, but also for

³³ Timothy R. Nichols, “Holding Center: The Theocentric Unity of Truth in the Postmodern World,” *CTS Journal* 11 (Spring 2005): 49–65.

³⁴ Howard Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago: Moody, 1991).

³⁵ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1991).

³⁶ Trevor McIlwain, *Firm Foundations: Creation to Christ* (Sanford, FL: New Tribes Mission, 1991), available from ntmbooks.com. Get the teacher’s manual; in this case, you are your own teacher.

believers who have not had this kind of teaching before; if you have never studied through biblical history systematically, you are in for a real treat.

Begin each lesson by studying through the passage of Scripture on your own. *After* you have done your own study, begin reading through the lesson. You will find, especially at the beginning, that McIlwain's lesson exposes a depth and richness in the passage that your own study did not uncover. When you catch yourself saying, "Why didn't I think of that?" do not be frustrated, but do entertain the question seriously. Why *didn't* you think of that? More specifically, what question did McIlwain ask that you did not ask? What observation did he make that you failed to make? Understand that McIlwain is a highly skilled reader, and it may take you a while to become that good. But by studying alongside him and watching what he does, you can get better.

Conclusion

God is an excellent communicator. It is a wonderful thing to know that in His love and infinite grace, God has made His Word accessible to us. What a tragic waste it would be, then, to know that we *could* understand the Word but fail to actually read it. How much more tragic still if we disregard the teachers and the resources God has provided for us, to help us learn how to understand the Bible.

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