

Getting It

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I talked with a charter member of the church I attended in another town that Sunday, a church with less-than-conservative views on the Bible. The question I asked was designed not only to give me information, but also to engage my new friend in thinking about his beliefs.

“What is your church’s view on the Bible?” I posed. “Well,” he answered, “I’m a chaplain for the Masons and I think we have a little stronger view of the Bible there than here. However, understanding the Bible is not easy. You have to know Hebrew, Greek and Babylonian to really get it.” (*Babylonian?*)

He must have assumed that his pastor knew Babylonian, because he avidly soaked in his senseless and untethered homilies. As I returned on a few occasions to this active religious gathering, I could tell the pastor’s Babylonian wasn’t actually working. He *always* missed the meaning of the texts he attempted to explain—and not by a little. If he did say something biblical, it was entirely by accident. I don’t think he was insincere, but rather, he just didn’t get it. And, as the saying goes, “When there is a mist in the pulpit, there’s a fog in the pew.”

Why don’t people understand the truths of the Bible? I’m not speaking of the finer points, but the basics, or that which a person needs to be justified. Why don’t they get it? To find the answer I went to the book of John, a book written to help people believe. John interplays with this notion of understanding versus blindness as an intentional theme.

We hardly begin reading John’s gospel before he alerts us to the sad fact that Christ was “in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own [the Jews], and those who were His own did not receive Him” (1:10-11 NASB). God was standing there in the person of Christ, yet was not perceived. “Receive” here means that they did not understand who He was, even though His actions and words repeatedly displayed it.

Later Jesus tells the religious leaders, “You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He has sent” (5:38). When these leaders appealed to their confidence in Moses writings over His words, Jesus said, “. . . if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words” (5:46-47)?

In fact, Jesus taught that it was *impossible* for these people to understand. “Why don’t you understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word” (8:43).

He got even plainer when he said: “But *because* I speak the truth, you do not believe in Me. . . . He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God” (8:45,47, emphasis mine).

In other words, if Jesus had spoken deceptively, or untruthfully in some way, they might have believed Him. But precisely *because* He spoke unadulterated truth, they could not understand.

John is not describing people who just aren’t bright. Many of these Jewish leaders were scholars, masters of both the Law and the commentaries. And they were reading the Law in its original language.

One of Jesus’ most colorful depictions of man’s inherent blindness comes in His famous treatise on sheep in chapter 10. He explains that He has “other” sheep yet to come in. “But,” speaking again to some Jewish contenders, “you do not believe *because* you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.” (10:26-27, emphasis mine). Believers don’t become sheep; sheep become believers.

So what does all of this mean?

It means two things: First, it is impossible for a person to be His sheep without believing His Word. When it is all said and done, true believers embrace God’s words (the *proximate object of faith*) as well as His person (the *ultimate object of faith*). A person who disbelieves the Bible may *never* rightly be considered a Christian.

Second, it means that *God* must remove blindness so that a person can understand and believe. Though we preach and argue the case, persuade and compel them to come (as we must, for this is the means God uses), the ability to understand is first granted by God. God has to be teaching *through* your teaching (6:44-45). You cannot merely educate people into the kingdom. The hope in this, however, is that even the most estranged person may, by an act of God that is sometimes sudden, understand so as to embrace Christ—both words and person.

“Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (5:24).

*(Here are a few of the many passages that speak of this: Romans 3: 10-11; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Acts 16:14; Mathew 13:11; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6)

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