

BIBLICAL EQUIPMENT for CHRISTIANS

INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMON FAITH AND UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

Studying and understanding the Bible can seem difficult and confusing but the Bible is essential for our spiritual growth and our relationship with God. The Bible is large and complex and can be very intimidating. “Where do I start?” “How do I apply what I learn?” “How do I know what is really important?” “What if my beliefs come in conflict, with what I read in the Bible?” There are answers to these questions in what the Bible calls the common faith.

The Bible describes a system of truths referred to as, the “common faith”, “the faith”, and the “unity of the faith” (Titus 1:4, Jude 1:3, Ephesians 4:13). These are not different faiths but descriptions of the same faith that God has given to all Christians (Ephesians 4:5). This faith is different from beliefs based solely on examples, opinions, personal experiences, beliefs of personal conscience and freedoms that only apply to the individual (not common to all), or faith as an act of believing. The common faith consists of truths that never change; truths that gives all Christians a basis for agreement and unity; truths that provides a standard for how we think, how we judge and prioritize what we believe and teach (1 Corinthians 1:10). To maintain that unity and to establish a solid foundation for our beliefs the Bible tells us “not to exceed what is written” (1 Corinthians 4:6). Common faith truths are plainly stated. These truths do not need the “interpretation” of men to make them understood. All generations can identify and understand plainly stated truths but mere opinions, denominational traditions, or special “interpretations” will never be applicable to all.

The common faith applies to all Christians regardless of culture, place, or time (Titus 1:4, 2 Peter 1:1) and they never change having been “once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 1:3). The same unchangeable truths believed by Peter are the same truths “handed down” to Christians today (1 Peter 1:1b). All Christians share a “common salvation” (Jude 1:3) and all share in one Spirit and one faith (Ephesians 4:4-6). Understanding this unifying faith is so important that God ties it to the knowledge of the Son of God having made those two things the ultimate goals for those with authority in the church (Ephesians 4:11-13). Pursuing these two goals will “result” in true spiritual stability and maturity for the individual and the proper functioning and growth of the church (Ephesians 4:14-16).

Titus 1:4a (NASB) To Titus, my true child in a **common faith**....:

Jude 1:3 (NASB) Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our **common salvation**, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that **you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints**.

Ephesians 4:11-16 (NASB) ¹¹ And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, ¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; ¹³ **until we all attain to the unity of the faith**, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴ **As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;** ¹⁵ but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Ephesians 4:4-6 (NASB) ⁴ *There is* **one body and one Spirit**, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵ **one Lord, one faith, one baptism**, ⁶ one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

1 Corinthians 1:10 (NASB) Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you **all agree** and that there be **no divisions** among you, but that you **be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment**.

1 Corinthians 4:6 (NASB) Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us **you may learn not to exceed what is written**, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.

2 Peter 1:1b (NASB)To those who have received **a faith of the same kind as ours**, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ:

Why is the common faith so important to how we read, study, and understand the Bible? The Bible draws a clear line between truths that apply to all (common faith) and beliefs held by the individual or a group of individuals. The common faith gives the church the foundation for a strong faith in God and equips the church with a standard for agreement, unity, thinking, and judgment to better understand what we read and study.

Consider 1 Corinthians 1:10. The exhortation is to agree without divisions. We must first know the basis for that agreement, the common faith. To maintain that agreement we must be “made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment”. We must have a standard for how we think and how we judge what we believe. Without such a standard, the result is division and instability. The Bible clearly states the things on which we must agree and the things where disagreement is perfectly acceptable. If no one knows, what is more important and less important the result is division and instability. Division occurs because there is no benchmark for maintaining unity. Instability occurs when one relies on divisive issues that are less important than common faith truths or when one relies on views that are in error. Having this standard, we can more easily identify those things that are essential and place less emphasis on what is not essential.

God has made the body of Christ, the church, as a complete functioning entity. We need each other. The hands need the feet and the eyes need the ears, etc. A divided church is an incomplete church. The church needs the common faith standard so we may be “**made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment**”. Without such a standard, the church will remain divided and that division prevents us from benefiting from the gifts of others. Many Christians believe there are only a few things on which all Christians may agree. Failing to see the thousands and thousands of common faith truths blocks the minds of these believers and as a result they miss out on a whole new world of biblical understanding.

Having proper judgment, about the beliefs we have requires us to understand the different ways we acquire those beliefs. The common faith is our foundation but we also learn from examples, some examples to follow, and some to avoid (1 Corinthians 10:11). We will all have opinions and even the Apostle Paul expressed his opinions (1 Corinthians 7:25). We will also have beliefs of personal conscience and freedom that only apply to the individual. On the common faith truths, we must agree (1 Corinthians 1:10) but on these other beliefs, we can disagree because they are subject to change, may only apply to the individual, and are not the foundation for our unity (Romans 14:5). To maintain that unity we must not think too highly of those purely personal beliefs and impose those beliefs on others (Romans 14:22). Using the common faith to discover these demarcation lines in our different types of beliefs allows us to have proper “judgment” about how we should organize, prioritize, and place proper emphasis on our beliefs.

1 Corinthians 10:11a (NASB) Now these things happened to them as **an example**, and they **were written for our instruction...**

1 Corinthians 7:25b (NASB)I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion....

Romans 14:5 (NASB) One person regards one day above another, another regards every day *alike*. **Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.**

Romans 14:22 (NASB) The faith which you have, **have as your own conviction before God**. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.

Those who teach should make clear distinctions between what is biblical fact and what is opinion just like the Apostle Paul did on the subject of marriage. Paul clearly separates a command of the Lord (that would have applied to all) from his own opinion (1 Corinthians 7:25). Many teachers fail to make

distinctions between these different types of beliefs and instead they represent opinions, denominational dogma, or tradition, as “God’s” word. These teachers are guilty of failing to properly educate those who hear them. If the teacher cannot make such distinctions then how will the hearer make such distinctions when they read the Bible? Many believe their opinions and denominational thinking are correct, and as a result ignore any biblical evidence to the contrary. However, these teachers bear an incredible responsibility and should heed God’s warnings about that responsibility (James 3:1, Deuteronomy 4:2, Proverbs 30:6).

James 3:1 (NASB) Let not many *of you* become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.

Deuteronomy 4:2 (NASB) "You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.

Proverbs 30:6 (NASB) **Do not add to His words** Or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar.

Some examples of common faith truths include:

Old Testament examples of common faith truths include:

- Who is God, man and Satan and who are angels and demons
- The history of creation, the sin of man and how death and sickness entered the world, the flood of Noah, and the creation of the Hebrew race
- God’s covenant with Israel
- The wisdom, prophecies, and worship found in the poetry section
- The mission of the prophets who foretold events in their day and prophesied about the Christ

New Testament examples of common faith truths include:

- The gospel of Christ that redeems sinful man through forgiveness of sins, being accepted by God because of Christ’s virgin birth, life, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven
- Spiritual rebirth and the gift of the Holy Spirit
- God’s placement of believers in Christ before the foundation of the world, a position that gives us the power to deal with sin and to walk in a new life
- The common faith gives us a system that helps us to find unity with other believers, to better understand the Bible, to prioritize our beliefs, separating unchangeable truths from more subjective beliefs, personal opinions, traditions, and to identify and remove error from our beliefs
- The common faith defines beliefs to be understood by all and sins that apply to all, showing us clear differences from the beliefs and sins that only apply to the individual
- The power of the Holy Spirit to change our natural thinking so we may understand God’s will
- The mission, growth, and proper function of the church
- Prophecies explaining the events before the return of Christ to this earth, and the final judgment

Lessons taken from examples may include:

- How Satan deceived Eve (see Genesis 3)
- The obedience of Noah (see Genesis 5-9)
- The faith of Abraham (see Genesis 13-25)
- David’s bravery, love for God and the consequences of his adultery (see Psalms, 1 & 2 Samuel)
- The conscience, bravery, and faith of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego (see Daniel)
- The temptation, sinless life, the suffering, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John)
- The confidence, knowledge, and faith of Stephen (see Acts 6-8)
- The response of the apostles when governmental authority commanded them not to preach the gospel (see Acts 5)

- Paul’s use of culture, creating an opportunity to share the gospel (see Acts 17:22-32)

The common faith does not provide detailed instruction for all circumstances so we look to examples for help. Examples provide views into the lives of others and these views help us to understand such as the example of Job who can inspire us when we must endure suffering (see Job). Teachers often use examples to support their point. If the subject is faith in God then we can look at the numerous examples of faith to see how faith works.

Our conclusions and personal beliefs based on examples must always be consistent with other truths and other examples. If we have an opinion based on an example then that opinion must not conflict with the Bible’s teaching or examples in another place. Many denominational beliefs have their origins in examples. Some of these beliefs are mixtures of examples, opinions, and personal conscience issues. We can trace many denominational differences back to examples such as taking communion every Sunday but these examples do not constitute a command or rise to the level of a common faith truth. We must give such traditions their proper place and they should never be points of contention. When we hear a teacher use expressions like “therefore” or “this means that...” then we are hearing a conclusion and the teacher should identify his or her views as such. The point is that those who teach and those who learn must make distinctions between rock-solid common faith truths, valuable lessons from examples and mere conclusions, opinions and traditions.

Opinions are important but they too are subject to change. We must never give them the same level of emphasis as common faith truths. Some biblical examples of opinions include:

- One’s opinion of oneself should not be exaggerated (see Romans 12:3)
- Paul’s opinion on marriage (1 Corinthians 7:25) and on giving (see 2 Corinthians 8:10)
- Job’s friend’s opinion on Job’s suffering (see Job 32)

The 14th chapter of Romans deals extensively with the issues of personal beliefs and freedoms. There are truths and sins that are common to all and there are beliefs and sins that only apply to the individual. On the unifying truths, we must agree but we can disagree on these purely personal matters. The Bible puts these beliefs in their proper place as purely and permanently personal (Romans 14:22) Despite this biblical fact personal conscience issues have been the source of great division throughout Christian history. According to the Bible, it does not matter if two or two million hold a similar personal belief those beliefs must not become sources for division. These beliefs are often subject to change as one grows spiritually or as culture changes. In the first century, there was concern over eating meat sacrificed to an idol. Many former idol worshippers would not eat such meat. Others viewed the idol as just another inanimate object. For the one, eating such meat was sin and for the other it was a freedom.

There are responsibilities for these personal beliefs and freedoms. The one who refrains or has given something up for conscience sake runs the risk of becoming legalistic and condemning the one with a freedom (Romans 14:10). Another potential problem occurs when we think we are more religious or superior because our sacrifice (Galatians 3:2-3). The one with freedom has the responsibility not to lead the weaker brother or sister into sin because of that freedom (Romans 14:15). There is also the responsibility that the freedom may turn into an opportunity for sin and become a trap (Galatians 5:13).

Romans 14:10 (NASB) But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

Galatians 3:2b-3 (NASB) ².... did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

Romans 14:15 (NASB) For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.

Galatians 5:13 (NASB) For you were called to freedom, brethren; only *do not turn* your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

The common faith gives us our solid foundation like basic training for a soldier. That training is the foundation of knowledge that will later dictate action. That training is the glue that binds the soldier to others in behavior and loyalty. That training is the filter through which all other lessons learned and opinions held must first pass. So too the common faith provides that same kind of training first establishing a foundation that shapes all future understanding and actions. Like the soldier some lessons may come from examples of others and some decisions may not be in the book being a matter left up to the individual's conscience. The common faith binds all believers together and provides the spiritual filter through which we can properly judge all that we learn, believe, and do.

As we read the Bible, the common faith can help us make decisions about what we believe and how to give those beliefs their proper emphasis. "Is this a common truth?" "What can I learn from this example?" "Does the lesson learned apply to others or to just me?" "Do these lessons provide instruction regarding a personal conscience issue?" "Can I reconcile my beliefs with what I read in the Bible?"

Let us consider some verses on sharing the gospel to see how to identify common faith truths, how we can apply lessons from examples, and how we can make decisions on matters of personal conscience. The Bible tells us to preach the gospel but it does not tell us exactly how to present the gospel. However, the Bible does tell us to show respect (Romans 12:17); to make the most of the opportunity; to be knowledgeable and prepared so we may give appropriate answers based on the individual's needs (Colossians 4:5-6); and be able to defend what we believe (1 Peter 3:15). The Apostle Paul put these truths to good use in his sermon on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17:21-23,28). Paul's knowledge of the local culture paid big dividends knowing there would be an opportunity to talk, using their own idol as a tool to present the gospel, and quoting their own poets to make a defense of the gospel he was presenting. Paul first demonstrated respect noting how religious the Athenians were and then he makes the most of the opportunity. Respect often creates opportunities. No one wants to hear from someone whose intent is condemnation. We must season our speech with "grace" and "salt" using wisdom to make knowledge acceptable and to win souls (Proverbs 15:2, 11:30).

Romans 12:17 (NASB) Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.

Colossians 4:5-6 (NASB)⁵ Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. ⁶Let your speech always be with grace, *as though* seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.

1 Peter 3:15 (NASB) but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence;

Acts 17:21-23 (NASB)²¹ (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)²² So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. ²³"For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.

Acts 17:28 (NASB) for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.'

Proverbs 15:2 (NASB) The tongue of the wise makes knowledge acceptable, But the mouth of fools spouts folly.

Proverbs 11:30 (NASB) The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, And he who is wise wins souls.

The individual can take lessons from these examples and use them to create opportunities with friends, with associates at work, with new acquaintances, or with complete strangers. However, those lessons may only apply to the individual. In addition, the individual may face a personal conscience issue even when such opportunities arise. Imagine a Christian who is presenting the gospel to a friend at work. The

Christian is a former alcoholic. If the friend wants to go to a bar after work to discuss the gospel some more what should the believer do. That believer may have a problem of conscience but the decision he makes will be his alone. How can he tell others if it is right or wrong for them to go to the bar and talk about Jesus? Such decisions the Bible leaves up to the individual.

As we read and consider such questions, we are building a system of beliefs. Building this system of beliefs is similar to driving an automobile. The Holy Spirit uses the Bible to teach us and keep us on the correct path but, like driving, we have to make constant adjustments to stay on that path. Staying on the correct path is the result of reading, adjusting, and reconciling our beliefs with the Bible. As we learn, we reprioritize and rearrange our beliefs. We will always be learning and moving things around. What we think is very important today, may be less important tomorrow. The point is that we become self-correcting and learn how to recognize what is important and then place proper emphasis on those things.

To understand the Bible requires a trust in the Holy Spirit's inspiration and design of the Bible. If we believe the common faith applies to all then we may need to discard or reprioritize many divisive denominational beliefs that we hold. As we trust in God's word and commit to understand it better God may take us to lonely and difficult places that challenge everything we believe. God often uses those times to strip away what is unnecessary. Throughout the Bible, we see so many examples of those lonely times of learning, but those examples so often precede great events.

Abraham who was still childless at almost one hundred years old waited faithfully for the promise of a son (see Genesis 17). Moses lived in Midian for many years before freeing his fellow Hebrews from their slavery (see Exodus 2:15-3:20). Before Jesus began His earthly ministry, we see Him in the wilderness being tempted after fasting for forty days. The Apostle Paul began his ministry only after preparing in Arabia (see Galatians 1:15-17). Paul also went to prison and wrote large portions of the New Testament from prison. It seems that when we are motivated to go, God so often says "Stop and go away with me. I have something great for you to do but you must learn first." During those times we prepare, we hunger, and learn because God knows what we will need to fulfill His will in the future.

Knowing God's will and understanding the Bible goes beyond a simple understanding of truths shared by all believers or how we sort through our beliefs. We need the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit inspired the written word of God and He wants to teach us what it contains. Forgiveness of sins does not change our natural and sinful way of thinking. Unless our minds are renewed by God's Spirit our natural mind will keep us in biblical and spiritual ignorance because we are incapable of understanding spiritual things (1 Corinthians 2:14). This is why many Christians still act like sinners after receiving forgiveness.

1 Corinthians 2:14 (NASB) But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

In contrast, the Holy Spirit uses the Bible to change, to transform, and to renew our minds so we are able to understand and accept God's perfect will for our lives (Romans 12:2). God is able to bless us beyond our wildest dreams (Psalms 1:2-3). In the western mind, we often view the word "prosper" (Psalms 1:3) as purely financial. Even in this, our thinking must change. Meditating on the Bible is not, a guarantee of material wealth but it is a guarantee of wisdom. In context, to prosper is to yield "fruit" and not fail or "wither". If we consider this promise as a common faith truth then it must be applicable to all, even to those believers in prison as was Joseph and the Apostle Paul. Did God prosper them in that setting? Yes!

Romans 12:2 (NASB) And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Psalms 1:2-3 (NASB) ² But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. ³ He will be like a tree *firmly* planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers.

Once our minds begin to change, God can trust us with deeper and deeper truths and wonders. If we do not trust and obey Him then why should He trust us with His deepest thoughts? For example, God gives us money but most do not handle it according to the Bible's commands. As a result, many go no further in their spiritual lives. If one cannot be trusted to obey God with the filthy currency of this world then why would God explain His will to such an unfaithful one?

Luke 16:11 (NASB) ¹¹ "Therefore if you have not been faithful in the *use of* unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true *riches* to you?"

On the other hand, what are true riches? What is it that a naturally minded Christian is missing? We are comprised of three distinct parts, spirit, soul, and body (1 Thessalonians 5:23), and yet we are one just as God is one and is also comprised of three parts, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The spirit is where we may know God who is spirit. Our soul is our mind, will, and emotions, literally who we are as individuals. Our body, our flesh, is where we have our physical senses to perceive the natural world. Imagine the soul as placed between the spirit and the body and able to understand each one. Just as your mind registers physical pain, your spirit understands your thoughts. However, the natural man focuses his mind on his flesh and is incapable of understanding spiritual things. The spiritual man focuses his mind on the Holy Spirit and is capable of understanding all things. So too, God's Holy Spirit knows the deepest thoughts of God and searches those thoughts and God has given us both His written word and His Holy Spirit so we may know the deepest thoughts of God (1 Corinthians 2:10-12). Indeed the last verse in this chapter declares that, "we have the mind of Christ". We begin incapable of grasping spiritual things and we end up with the mind of Christ having the Holy Spirit to show us the deepest thoughts of God. Having access to the mind of Christ what we do will "prosper" as we find God's will.

1 Thessalonians 5:23b (NASB) ... and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete...

1 Corinthians 2:10-12 (NASB) ¹⁰For to us God revealed *them* through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. ¹¹For who among men knows the *thoughts* of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the *thoughts* of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. ¹²Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God,

1 Corinthians 2:16 (NASB) For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ.

Humans are curious creatures. We hunger for simplicity and order but we thrive on adventure and discovery. As we consider the common faith that gives us order and structure to our understanding of the Bible let us, also consider the incredible adventures and discoveries that wait for us. God has given us such a solid foundation in the common faith. God has given us the Holy Spirit who shares with us God's deepest thoughts and reveals His will. We have the power to change lives and make disciples and those disciples will be capable of influencing future generations. These are amazing things.

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