

---

## Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

---

While Timothy is fresh on our minds, it would be a good time to consider this divine admonition regarding our use of the Scriptures:

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

The word "study" is from "spoudazo" which means to hasten to do something, to be eager and diligent. The words "rightly dividing" are from "orthotomeo" which literally means "to cut straight."

Timothy was to hasten and be diligent in his use of scriptures so that he might be approved of God. He was not to swerve aside on tangents but was to "cut straight" ahead in doing God's will.

Those whom Timothy was to rebuke used the Scriptures, but they used them in the wrong way. We must be careful to avoid their error and "rightly divide" the Word of God. Consider the following: *the Scriptures are inspired!* Technically the word "scriptures" simply refers to something which is written. In the Christian context, however, we refer to those writings which are

accepted as inspired of God. When God communicates to man, it matters not whether His voice is thundered from Mt. Sinai, spoken through a mediator named Moses or written down on tablets of stone or pieces of paper — it is an inspired message. The people of God are to be scrupulously diligent in differentiating between those messages which are inspired and those which are not. Thus from the earliest of times we have had a collection of sacred or inspired documents.

It is not within our scope at this time to discuss the means by which the Scriptures were accepted, or deemed as canonical, but simply to reaffirm that:

All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (II Tim. 3:16-17).

While these words apply specifically to the Canon of Old Testament Scriptures which Timothy had known from a child, they apply in principle to the New Testament Scriptures as well.

As inspired documents we are obliged to read, study and obey the Scriptures as though our God were communicating with us audibly, visibly and personally. *Yet*, we must carefully distinguish between God Himself and the vehicle by which He communicates to man.

*The Bible is not to be worshipped!* Peter was an inspired Apostle. Special privileges and responsibilities were conferred upon Peter and the others (See Matt. 16 and 18; Jn. 14 and 16, etc.). *But Peter was not to be worshipped.* When Cornelius attempted to do so, he was rebuked, "Stand up; I myself also am a man" (Acts 10:26). In similar fashion we must remember that the Bible is not God. It is the vehicle by which God communicates to man but not God Himself. We are to worship God not the Bible.

These remarks about the Scriptures are written with considerable reluctance. Many people may misunderstand. Some are like little children, tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine. Their lack of study renders them vulnerable to many erroneous views and extreme positions. They may read these words and conclude that the Bible is not an accurate guide. God forbid! The Bible is an accurate guide. It is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path (Ps. 119:105). It should be studied with diligence and its truths should be incorporated into our lives so that they become an inseparable part of our thoughts, words and actions.

The thesis which we propose is that it is wrong to use the Sword of the Spirit to mutilate and divide the Body of Christ. Or if you prefer the terminology of light, it is wrong to cover the Lamp of the Gospel under the "bushel" of sectarian creeds and dogmas. Why do men write creeds? To protect the truth. Every creed is someone's attempt to preserve the purity of the faith. But every time we endeavor to protect the light we produce darkness.

Our use of the Scriptures should be in harmony with God's eternal plan.

To support my thesis, let us consider the following facts regarding the use of the Scriptures by the early Christians.

### **Septuagint Version**

The early Christians primarily used the Septuagint Version, not the Hebrew. With reference to the Septuagint Version the I.S.B.E. states:

It was the Bible of most writers of the New Testament. Not only are the majority of their express citations from scripture borrowed from it, but their writings contain numerous reminiscences of its language. Its words are household words to them. It laid for them the foundations of a new religious terminology. It was a potent weapon for missionary work, and when VSS of the Scriptures into other languages became necessary it was in most cases the LXX and not the Hebrew from which they were made (p. 2722).

At the same time it is an undeniable fact that the LXX was not as reliable as the Hebrew as regarding technical accuracy.

Still quoting from the I.S.B.E. regarding the Septuagint:

. . . The Greek text has had a long and complex history of its own. Used for centuries by both Jews and Christians it underwent corruption and interpolation, and notwithstanding the multitude of materials for its restoration, the original text has yet to be recovered . . . the Gr. Pent. E.G., has survived in a relatively pure form. But everywhere we have to be on our guard against interpolations, sometimes extending to whole paragraphs. Not a verse is without its array of variant readings. An indication of the amount of 'mixture' which has taken place is afforded by the numerous 'doublets' or alternative renderings of a single Hebrew word or phrase which appear side by side in the transmitted text. *Textual corruption began early, before the Christian era . . .*

The use of the Septuagint Version by the early Christians is quite significant. Though it did not possess the minute accuracy of the Hebrew text, it was completely adequate for use by inspired

apostles and the early disciples who labored under their instructions.

### **Formation of the Canon**

The early Church existed, evangelized and thrived for approximately three quarters of a century without the whole Bible in written form. The revelation of truth to the Apostles of our Lord came gradually. The first words of Christian scripture may have been written within a decade or so of the Great Commission, but the last words were probably not recorded until near the close of the first century. This simple fact would have precluded any legalistic use of the Christian Scriptures by the early church as a whole.

### **Accepting the Canon**

Though the Christian Canon was complete by the end of the first century it does not seem to have been universally accepted at that time. Many spurious and apocryphal works have survived even unto this present age, and the early Christians were some time establishing an accepted canon. As a matter of fact, the first extant list of canonical books that agrees with our own dates back only to the fourth century. We have discovered ten different catalogues produced in the fourth century. Six of them agree with our own, three omitted the book of Revelation and the last omitted both Hebrews and Revelation. Based upon this information we must conclude that the application of Revelation 22:18-19 by the early Christians must have been done with considerable charity.

As amazing as it sounds, the Church was able to thrive during those difficult centuries before a rigid canon was universally accepted. Perhaps those years were the most productive years the church has ever known, and it was accomplished by soul winners who hid the New Testament in their hearts instead of their vest pockets.

### **Chapters and Verses**

It should be remembered that the books of our Bible were not written in chapters and verses. The division of the Scriptures into chapters did not occur until the 13th century. It is ascribed by some to Cardinal Hugo de St. Cara (1248) and by others to Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury (1227). The division of these chapters into verses first appears in 1551 in Robert Stephens' edition of the Greek Testament.

Whatever your own personal view might be about proving your point by book, chapter and verse, it is a bit sobering to realize that Christianity existed some 1500 years without being able to do so.

### **Koine Greek**

The language of the New Testament Scriptures is the language of the common people. It is not the literary Attic or some special sacred or scientific language used exclusively for a revelation from Jehovah; it is the everyday language used by people everywhere at the time of Christ. This discovery, said A.T. Robertson, has "revolutionized the study of the Greek New Testament." The language used by the inspired Apostles to communicate the message of God to man was the Koine Greek. It was the vernacular used in the transaction of everyday business. Love letters, deeds, marriage contracts and random notes all contain the very language incorporated into our Bible.

It might also be well to be reminded at this juncture that we do not have in our possession a single autographed copy of any book of our Bible. We are to worship God, not the vehicle by which He communicates to man.

### **Study Helps**

The Bible has never been available in quantity to all of God's people. Even in this enlightened age there are some 1500 languages and dialects into which the Bible is yet to be translated. There are literally thousands of Christians who have no Bible at all.

English-speaking people have many versions from which to choose, but only nine percent of the people in our world are English-speaking people. We also have at our disposal a wide assortment of commentaries and concordances to help us dissect the Scriptures and structure our theology. This privilege has never been available to the vast majority of God's people, and it has only been available to us within the past couple of centuries.

This is not to deny the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures. Nor is it to minimize the tireless efforts of Christians down through the centuries who committed vast portions of Scripture to memory and who diligently taught them to their children. It is only to attempt to place our present preoccupation with legalistic proof-texting in a proper perspective.

The whole tenor of the pastoral epistles, as well as the verses immediately before and immediately after II Timothy 2:15, deals with avoiding fruitless controversy and argumentation. What a

tragedy that we have used the Sword of the Spirit to destroy the Body of Jesus, not defend it!

Of these things put them in remembrance, charging them before the Lord that they strive not about words to no profit, but to the subverting of the hearers. Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker . . . (II Tim. 2:14-17).

### **Aren't We Governed by the Scriptures?**

The answer to this question is no! Technically we are not governed by the Scriptures, but rather by *our understanding of the Scriptures*. While this may seem to some like "straining on a gnat" or "splitting a theological hair," it is so germane to the nature of Christianity that we must pursue it a bit further.

Written documents must always be interpreted. That which is "clear" to one interpreter may not at all be clear to someone else.

Let us take, for example, the written command, "Thou shalt not kill." To simplistically say that this command says what it means and means what it says is to beg the question. Is a man who swats a mosquito or plucks a flower in violation of this command? In both instances he has brought death to something which was alive. No, we correctly respond — the commandment "means" thou shalt not kill a fellow human being.

The problem of interpreting this commandment is far from being over at this point. Next we must face up to the issue of capital punishment. Immediately someone will respond, "Capital punishment is ordained of God, and the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill' actually 'means' thou shalt do no murder."

Assuming that you are willing to admit the validity of capital punishment, we are still a long way from solving all of our problems relative to the interpretation of these four simple words. Next we must render a judgment upon what actually constitutes a "murder" or a "capital offense." A man is not guilty of murder, we say, when an axe head slips off accidentally and slays a bystander (Deut. 19:5). But now the issue of murder is made even more complex, for if murder is defined by the intentions of the heart, then it can never be determined by human tribunals with complete accuracy. "For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the Spirit of man which is in him? . . ." (I Cor. 2:11). Premeditated murder may sometimes appear to be

accidental, and accidental murder may sometimes appear to be premeditated.

But even the issue of capital punishment is but a small matter when compared to the issues of international war. Does the command, "Thou shalt not kill," mean that a man should not bear arms in combat? If your answer to this question depends upon any mitigating circumstances, you are again adrift upon a shoreless sea, for circumstances invariably change. Thus the simple command, "Thou shalt not kill," is not so simple after all. Our understanding of these words will vary depending upon our background, maturity and individual point of view. It is also highly probable that at some point in the process of our maturity we will even disagree with ourselves.

Every written document must be interpreted. In the days of the theocracy, Moses was God's Mediator who pronounced judgment upon those who violated the Law. For example, Leviticus 24 tells of a man who blasphemed the Lord, and Leviticus 15 tells of one who gathered sticks upon the Sabbath Day. In each instance the offending party was placed in ward until the mind of Jehovah was revealed to Moses. Death by stoning was the verdict in both cases; but it is significant to note that the Ten Commandments had to be interpreted, and that as long as an inspired man like Moses was around to do this, the nation was unified. It is both interesting and important to remember that those who disagreed with Moses were destroyed (see Numbers 16).

Jesus is a prophet like Moses. His appearance was predicted in Deuteronomy 18:15-18, and the fulfillment by Jesus of this prediction is stated emphatically in Acts 3:22ff. He is the one Mediator between God and man, and those who disagree with Jesus will be destroyed from among the people. But Jesus is the Mediator of a better covenant than Moses. The New Covenant is as distinct from the Old as Isaac was from Ishmael. It is significant to remember that the New Covenant does not have to be interpreted like the Old, for it is not written with ink, neither engraven upon tablets of stone. It is written only upon the fleshly tablets of the human heart (II Cor. 3:3). God has put His laws upon our minds and within our hearts (Heb. 8:10).

At this juncture I must state emphatically that the New Covenant or New Testament is not the 27 books which we so frequently designate as such. Neither is the Old Covenant the 39 books which we call the Old Testament.

The Old Covenant consisted only of ten commandments. They

were written upon tablets of stone at Mt. Sinai in Arabia when God took His people by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. The tablets were placed in a receptacle which was appropriately designated the "Ark of the Covenant," and the Old Covenant was broken before many books of Hebrew Scripture were even written. These commandments were never intended to save men, they were rather a schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ that we might be justified by faith (Gal. 3:24).

The New Covenant is also called the "Royal Law," the "Law of Liberty" and the "Law of Christ." It is not written down in human words so some spiritual Supreme Court can hand down rulings on what it means. It is written upon the hearts of those who have been born again. The law of Christ is to "bear one another's burdens" (Gal. 6:2). The Royal Law is to love your neighbour as yourself (Ja. 2:8). The Law of Liberty is to show mercy (Ja. 2:12-13).

If the Scriptures are not the covenant, then what are they? They are instructions written to a covenant people! They are inspired of God; they are to be read, believed and obeyed, *but they can never be made binding upon a person further than he is capable of perceiving them.* The fact that no two Christians are at the same level of maturity and understanding will mean that their grasp of the Scriptures will never be identical.

Every written document must be interpreted. When the Supreme Court renders a decision upon what the Constitution actually means, it is rarely a unanimous decision and frequently is diametrically opposed to the mainstream of American thought. The Christian Covenant rises above this difficulty through the Divine imperative of love.

Alexander Campbell spoke to this point in the "Parable of the Iron Bedstead," which was recorded in a Nineteenth Century publication called *The Christian Baptist*.

In the days of the Abecedarian popes it was decreed that a good Christian just measured *three* feet, and for the peace and happiness of the church it was ordained that an iron bedstead with a wheel at one end and a knife at the other, should be placed at the threshold of the church, on which the Christians should all be laid. This bedstead was just three feet in the casement on the exactest French scales. Every Christian in those days was laid on this bedstead; if less than the standard, the wheel and a rope were applied to him to stretch him to it; if he was too tall, the knife was applied to his extremities. In this way they kept the good Christians, for nearly a thousand years, all of one stature. Those to whom the knife or the



wheel were applied either died in the preparation or were brought to the saving standard.

One sturdy fellow, called Martin Luther, was born in those days who grew to the enormous height of four feet; he of course feared the bedstead and the knife and kept off at a considerable distance deliberating how he might escape. At length he proclaimed that there was a great mistake committed by his ancestors in fixing upon three feet as the proper standard of the stature of a good Christian. He made proselytes to his opinions; for many who had been tried on the three foot bedstead, who were actually four feet, had found a way of contracting themselves to the popular standard. These began to stretch themselves to their natural stature, and Luther had in a few years an iron bedstead four feet long fashioned and fixed in his churches, with the usual appendages. The wheel and the knife soon found something to do in Luther's church; and it became as irksome to flesh and blood to be stretched by a wheel and rope to four feet, or to be cut down to that stature, as it was to be forced either up or down to the good and sacred three foot stature. Moreover, men grew much larger after Luther's time than before, and a considerable proportion of them advanced above his perfect man; insomuch that John Calvin found it expedient to order his iron bedstead to be made six inches longer, with the usual regulating appendages. The next generation found even Calvin's measure as unaccommodating as Luther's; and the Independents, in their greater wisdom and humanity, fixed their perfect Christian at the enormous stature of five feet. The Baptists at this time began to think of constructing an iron bedstead to be in fashion with their neighbors, but kindly made it six inches longer than the Congregationalists' and dispensed with the knife, thinking that there was likely to be more need for two wheels than one knife, which they accordingly affixed to their apparatus. It was always found that in the same proportion as the standard was lengthened, Christians grew; and the bedstead now is actually proved to be at least six inches too short. It is now expected that six inches will be humanely added, but this will only be following up an evil precedent; for experience has proved that as soon as the iron bedstead is lengthened, the people will grow apace, and it will be found too short even when extended to six feet. Why not, then dispense with this piece of popish furniture in the church, and allow Christians of every stature to meet at the same fireside and eat at the same table?

It is important to remember that all who belong to Jesus are members of the same family. Fraternity is based upon paternity. But in a family we have various levels of maturity and understanding. When the father speaks, not all members of the

family comprehend his words in identically the same way. *Every member of the family has a right to hear the Father and to search for meaning in the Father's words, but he does not have the right to bind his understanding of that message upon his brethren further than they are capable of perceiving it.*

It was six men of Indostan  
 To learning much inclined,  
 Who went to see the elephant  
 (Though all of them were blind),  
 That each by observation  
 Might satisfy his mind.

The first approached the elephant,  
 And, happening to fall  
 Against his broad and sturdy side  
 At once began to bawl,  
 "God bless me! but the elephant  
 Is very like a wall!"

The second, feeling of the tusk  
 Cried: "Ho! what have we here  
 So very round and smooth and sharp?  
 To me 'tis mighty clear  
 This wonder of an elephant  
 Is very like a spear!"

The third approached the animal,  
 And happening to take  
 The squirming trunk within his hands,  
 Thus boldly up and spake:  
 "I see," quoth he, "The elephant,  
 Is very like a snake!"

The fourth reached out his eager hand,  
 And felt about the knee;  
 "What most this wondrous beast is like  
 Is mighty plain," quoth he;  
 "'Tis clear enough the elephant  
 Is very like a tree."

The fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,  
 Said, "E'en the blindest man  
 Can tell what this resembles most.  
 Deny the fact who can,  
 This marvel of an elephant  
 Is very like a fan!"

The sixth no sooner had begun  
 About the beast to grope,

Than, seizing on the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope,  
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant  
Is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!

So, oft in theologic wars  
The disputants, I ween,  
Rail on in utter ignorance  
Of what each other mean,  
And prate about an elephant  
Not one of them has seen!

*The Blind Men and the Elephant* by John G. Saxe

### Questions for Discussion — Lesson 10

1. What Scriptures were available for Timothy to study?
2. How had the trouble makers at Ephesus used the Scriptures?
3. How would handling the Scriptures aright correct this problem?
4. If Jesus and His apostles were preaching to our generation, what version would they quote from?
5. Is it necessary to have concordances and commentaries to correctly study the Bible? Is it wrong to use them?
6. Is there an infallible interpretation of the Scripture? If so, who gives it?
7. How do we draw the line regarding Christian fellowship?