

# Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

By Ben Webb

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"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." 2 Timothy 2:15

Regular visitors to the DB should realize by now that this site has never claimed to be the final authority on "rightly dividing the word of truth" - and for good reason. Who is to judge whether or not the word of truth is being "rightly" divided? The Dispensational Berean? God forbid! Even mid-Acts dispensationalists who claim to be "rightly dividing" disagree (sometimes strongly!) as to whether or not the 12 apostles became members of the body of Christ; whether or not the King James Bible is the only Bible to use; whether this present dispensation began in Acts 9, Acts 13, or Acts 28 (some mid-Acts Dispensationalists believe the body of Christ began during the mid-Acts period, but this present dispensation did not begin until Acts 28); whether or not Paul wrote the book of Hebrews; whether or not Christians today should observe the Lord's Supper; etc. That's eleven differing opinions already, just among mid-Acts Dispensationalists! (and then there are those who insist that the body of Christ began in Acts 11; those who believe this present dispensation began in Acts 15...) While these are all relatively minor issues, they can quickly become a true "middle wall" between Brothers in Christ, if we are not careful (see Ephesians 2:14). Just try to take a firm stand on some of these issues during a mid-Acts Bible conference, and see the discord that can break out among "rightly dividers"!

Indeed, the words "rightly dividing" have become a literal mantra among Dispensationalists. This mantra is often chanted by mid-Acts and Acts 28 Dispensationalists, and even some Traditional (Acts 2) Dispensationalists, to imply that anyone who disagrees with a particular viewpoint - for whatever reason - is "wrongly dividing" the word, even if the opposing viewpoint can be supported from Scripture. Case in point - there is the true story of an Acts 2 Dispensationalist pastor and friend of one family for many, many years, until that family got on the "rightly dividing" band wagon. At a funeral for one of the family members, another pastor (who claimed to "rightly divide" the word) stated that the deceased family member had only been blessed to understand the Bible after learning to "rightly divide" according to his own Dispensational viewpoint - implying that the previous Acts 2 pastor had been teaching garbage by "wrongly dividing" the word. Never mind that both pastors were Dispensationalists (i.e., they both recognized the separation of the church and Israel), and were in total agreement

concerning grace, the gospel, the Deity of Christ, the inerrancy of Scripture, the second advent, etc.

This just goes to show that it is far too easy to become judgmental when we claim to "rightly divide" the word. We may honestly believe that only those who agree with our particular viewpoint are "rightly dividing" the word, but we often come across as being arrogant when we make this claim - especially when those who hold the opposing viewpoint believe their position is also supported by Scripture.

The word translated as "rightly dividing" in 2 Timothy 2:15 is the Greek word "Orthotomeo". We will consult a couple of reference works here, in an attempt to determine what Paul meant by the term:

Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, Copyright 1980 by Abingdon Press, lists the word "Orthotomeo" (# 3718 in its Greek dictionary) with the definition, "...to make a straight cut, i.e. (fig.) to dissect (expound) correctly (the divine message): - rightly divide."

Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words, Published in 1997 by Thomas Nelson, Inc., Copyright 1996, lists the word under "DIVIDE, DIVIDER, DIVIDING" on page 319, with the following definition: 8. ORTHOTOMEO, lit., to cut straight (orthos, straight, temno, to cut), is found in 2 Tim. 2:15, A.V., "rightly dividing," R.V., "handling aright" (the word of truth); the meaning passed from the idea of cutting or dividing, to the more general sense of rightly dealing with a thing. What is intended here is not dividing Scripture from Scripture, but teaching Scripture accurately.

So based upon the above definitions, we can conclude that those who are teaching Scripture inaccurately, and those who are incorrectly expounding the divine message, are indeed wrongly dividing the word of truth. But again - who is to be the judge here? Do mid-Acts Dispensationalists who think Paul wrote the book of Hebrews have the right to accuse other mid-Acts Dispensationalists of "wrongly dividing"? Are they truly dissecting (expounding) "the divine message" incorrectly (Strong's definition), if they reject Paul's authorship of Hebrews? Well, maybe so. Or, does a mid-Acts Dispensationalist who observes the Lord's Supper have the right to accuse other mid-Acts Dispensationalists of "wrongly dividing", and teaching Scripture inaccurately (Vine's definition), if they choose not to observe the Lord's Supper? Again, maybe he does. If that's honestly the way these Dispensationalists understand the Scriptures, and they honestly feel that they should be adamant concerning their beliefs, they do have that right. It is the Lord that looks upon the heart.

But before accusing others of "wrongly dividing" the word, we should first realize that no two people are going to completely agree 100 percent concerning every teaching in the Bible. So if we take either of the above definitions in its strictest sense, any Christian could accuse every

other Christian of "wrongly dividing" the word, every time he disagrees with even one belief - no matter how minor.

So, where do we draw the line between "rightly dividing" and "wrongly dividing"? And who are we, anyway, to accuse others of "wrongly dividing" the word? How do we avoid being so arrogant as to think that only those Christians who agree with our viewpoint are "rightly dividing" the word, when those who disagree believe their viewpoint is also supported by Scripture? Well, while realizing that two people will never agree on every teaching concerning the Bible, we still need to determine who would be guilty of "wrongly dividing" the word of truth, by either violating Vine's definition of "...teaching Scripture accurately", or by violating Strong's definition of dissecting (expounding) correctly "the divine message". Anyone who violates these definitions would certainly be guilty of "wrongly dividing" the word.

But so far, all of the above-mentioned opposing views are still valid within the framework of mid-Acts Dispensationalism, because they can all be supported with Scripture, to the extent that the Scripture being quoted is understood by the person quoting it. And therein lies the problem. Because a definition of "rightly dividing" or "wrongly dividing" is dependent upon one's understanding of Scripture, what happens if someone discovers that his understanding of Scripture is incorrect, and changes his belief? Let's say that someone believes Christians should never observe the Lord's Supper today, and accuses those who do observe it of "wrongly dividing" the word. But suppose he changes his mind, based upon further study of Scripture, and decides that Christians should observe the Lord's Supper, after all. Now, he is among those whom he previously accused of "wrongly dividing" the word. And yet, he honestly believes he is now "rightly dividing" the word, and those who do not observe the Lord's Supper are the ones "wrongly dividing" it.

The answer, in this writer's opinion, is found in Strong's definition, "...to make a straight cut", as well as in the last sentence of Vine's definition: "...not dividing Scripture from Scripture, but teaching Scripture accurately". Herein lies the key. The identifying mark of a Dispensationalist is that he tries to "make a straight cut" (Strong's definition) between Israel and the church. A Dispensationalist knows that Scriptures which apply to Israel were not written to the church, and Scriptures which were written to the church do not apply to Israel.

And yet, one of the most common objections concerning Dispensationalism is the false accusation that we "divide Scripture from Scripture" by throwing away any Scriptures that don't apply to us - when that is not the case at all. One cannot teach Scripture accurately unless one realizes that all Scripture was written for our learning, as Paul states in Romans 15:4 -

For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

Indeed, Vine's definition of "dividing Scripture from Scripture" implies rejecting the inspiration of certain Scriptures, due to an erroneous belief that other Scriptures are "more inspired". If that is what he means, then he is correct in his condemnation of "dividing Scripture from Scripture".

And yet, one cannot teach Scripture accurately by taking Scriptures which were written to Israel and applying them to the church, or vice-versa. Just as it's wrong today to stone a man for gathering sticks on the Sabbath (see Numbers 15:32-36), it is also wrong to take the Lord's instructions for Israel and apply them to the church today. So, we Dispensationalists make the "straight cut" at the point in the book of Acts when we believe the present church began. Because Acts 2 ("Traditional") Dispensationalists believe the church began in Acts chapter 2, that is where they make their "straight cut" between Scriptures which apply to Israel and Scriptures which apply to the church. But Acts 28 Dispensationalists do not believe the present church began until Acts 28 (or later), so that is where they make their "straight cut" in Scripture. And mid-Acts Dispensationalists believe the church began sometime in the mid-Acts period, so they make their own "straight cut" near the middle of Acts.

Consequently, by claiming to "rightly divide" the word of truth, most Dispensationalists are simply recognizing the distinction between those Scriptures which were written to Israel, and the Scriptures which are written to the church. They are being fully compliant with Vine's definition of "not dividing Scripture from Scripture, but teaching Scripture accurately", because they are not claiming that some Scriptures are "more inspired" than others. Rather, they are simply obeying the Scriptures that they believe were written to them, and are not trying to follow those Scriptures which were written to Israel.

It is therefore the opinion of this writer that "rightly dividing the word of truth" is a reference to the Dispensational method of Bible study - regardless of whether it is from an Acts 28, mid-Acts, or Acts 2 (Traditional) viewpoint. As long as a firm distinction is made between Israel and the church, the Dispensationalist will be in compliance with Vine's definition of "not dividing Scripture from Scripture, but teaching Scripture accurately", as well as Strong's definition of dissecting or expounding correctly the divine message. By teaching that we should obey only those Scriptures which were written to the church, we are not implying that we should divide Scripture from Scripture, because it is all equally inspired. We simply mean that we are to rightly divide the word of truth, as Paul instructs us to do in 2 Timothy 2:15.

Please realize, though, that this writer is still not claiming to be the final authority on "rightly dividing the word of truth". He would never insist that only Dispensationalists are "rightly dividing" the word, when the Covenant Theologian also believes his viewpoint is supported by Scripture. Yes, this writer has concluded that "rightly dividing the word of truth" refers to the Dispensational method of Bible study. This writer believes that Paul is instructing us to "rightly

divide" the Scriptures which were written to the church from those Scriptures which apply to Israel. But those who disagree should realize that this is only the opinion of this writer, based on his understanding of the Scriptures. As stated earlier, one's view of "rightly dividing" or "wrongly dividing" is dependent upon one's understanding of Scripture. If this writer has an incorrect understanding of the Scriptures, then he could be wrong to conclude that "rightly dividing" is a reference to Dispensational Bible study.

But why should this writer make this concession at all? Why not adamantly state that "rightly dividing the word of truth" is a reference to Dispensational Bible study, and leave it at that? Well, it's because we are being given a truly awesome responsibility, when we are told to "rightly divide the word of truth". This writer would hazard a guess that the vast majority of those who claim to "rightly divide" are not aware of the following distinct possibility concerning the "word of truth" they are to rightly divide:

It seems that the words "rightly dividing the word of truth" in 2 Tim. 2:15 must refer to more than just "rightly dividing" the Scriptures, because this same word of truth also "begat" the believers to whom James was writing, according to James 1:18 -

"Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."

Likewise, this "word of truth" was the gospel of the Ephesians' salvation that they heard before they trusted in Christ, according to Eph. 1:12-14 -

"That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory."

It should be noted that the Greek word "logos" is translated "word" in each of the above passages (be careful; Strong's has an error in its listing of one of these verses). What, then, is this word of truth, or this "logos" of truth, that we are to rightly divide, which was powerful enough to beget believers? Could this "logos" of truth be the living logos of God, that discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart? Please notice Hebrews 4:12-13 -

"For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do."

How awesome! According to verse 12 above, this word (logos) of God does indeed discern the thoughts and intents of the heart! How is this possible? Well, the passage also states that this same logos of God is "quick" (alive!), and that all creatures are manifest in "his" sight. So, the word of God actually reads the thoughts and intents of those who read it!

How, then, could this writer ever have the audacity to adamantly claim that "rightly dividing the word of truth" can only be a reference to Dispensational Bible study, when the word of God is able to read the thoughts and intents of his own heart? Indeed, we find that there are other Christians (true believers in Christ) who totally reject Dispensationalism; and yet they also claim to be the ones who are "rightly dividing the word of truth". Some of these groups actually point to the existence of the various Dispensational "camps" (Acts 2, mid-Acts, Acts 28) as "proof" that Dispensationalists are confused. In fact, some actually go so far as to claim that Dispensationalists are not even Christians! Talk about audacity!

Well, maybe some of these Covenant Theologians are indeed "rightly dividing" the word, as Paul intended. If so, then Dispensational Bible study would admittedly be an erroneous approach, and there would be no distinction between Israel and the church. This writer is willing to admit the possibility; and yet he must stand for what he believes. But what if these groups are wrong? Again, based upon Heb. 4:12-13 above, it is this writer's opinion (strictly an opinion) that anyone who approaches the word of truth with a preconceived notion is going to find exactly what he is looking for. If someone believes the word of truth has errors in it, then they will be led to believe they are finding real errors. But if they approach the word of truth with the belief that it is indeed the word of truth, these apparent errors will be resolved. And if any believer - Dispensationalist, Covenant Theologian, whatever - approaches the word of truth with the idea that they are the final authority on "rightly dividing the word of truth", the living word of God will discern the thoughts and intents of their hearts, and they will remain blinded by their own ignorance.