

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

By Jeremy Lucas

Before I begin, we must at least acknowledge the reality that many reading these pages or these discussions may not know anything at all about the term "rightly dividing." So with that in mind, let me start by introducing the concept in a limited capacity. This brief synopsis will not provide an ultimate justice, but it may at least, lead you to ask further questions at our discussion board.

The topic stems from a single verse found in 2 Timothy. In order to present more fully the overview of this concept, here are two translations of the text for 2 Timothy 2:15...

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

"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth." 2 Timothy 2:15 NASB

The term we use today (in translation) to mean "rightly dividing" or "handling accurately" comes from the original Greek word, Orthotomeo. In its simplest form, the word means "to cut or divide." This was the only time in which Paul chose to use this word with regard to the handling of truth. 2 Timothy was nearly the last (if not THE last) book that Paul sat down to write.

"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;" 2 Timothy 4:6-7

Paul had often fought a fight through which he felt little to no support from anyone around him. Indeed it was Paul himself who was rejected in Jerusalem for allegedly "advocating teachings against the Law of Moses." (Acts 21:21) His support was fading and you can see in these previous quoted "final words" a very emotional goodbye. While reading this, it would do you well to open your own Bible to 2 Timothy 4 and glance at verse 9 on. A series of previous apostles had gradually separated themselves from Paul and his teaching. A distinction was being made and Paul himself could no longer fight the fight. He had "finished" the race.

So why at this point would Paul use the phrase "cut or divide" the word of truth? At the end of his letter-writing, Paul is realizing that truth is being "distorted." We know that from the series of verses that includes this thought...

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths." 2 Timothy 4:3-4

The statement addresses the wicked people of the world, but it also addresses the people who are seeking truth. In this case, truth-seekers are going to teachers who make them feel good or "tickle their ears."

Prior to this point in Scripture, Paul's letters regarding salvation through faith alone, being crucified with Christ, separation from law under grace...all were gradually being gathered and discussed among believers. Those who no longer had Paul's face or voice to teach them were now turning to his writing (letters) to understand what message it was he was trying to present in its fullness. They did not have the full "written" message in their possession, so just as many people do today, they were turning to the leading teachers who stood before them. Problem was, many of these teachers did NOT know what Paul had been teaching. Either that or they knew and they didn't want to continue teaching it.

Paul's message was a "revelation of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:12)." In order to categorize something as divine revelation, it must be something not previously revealed (making it no longer a revelation). Paul's revelation held "new information" for those he would be preaching to. Meaning? Paul was not and would not be preaching the exact same message that had always been preached throughout the nation of Israel up to that point.

In order to allow all of Scripture to be understood in a way that men might come to the "full knowledge of truth (I Tim. 2:4)," Paul had to stress to Timothy that coming to that knowledge involves division. Timothy knew that there was a difference between salvation and the knowledge of truth. God Himself separates the two by suggesting that man can have salvation, but not have the full knowledge of truth. Yet in God's desire, we SHOULD aspire toward finding the full knowledge of truth. Hence, Paul finally states, "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman who needeth not to be ashamed, who rightly divides the word of truth."

Truth in Scripture consists of information to apply and information to understand. Some will turn to Leviticus for the sheer fact of wanting to "understand" what God's intent once was through the Mosaic Law. Were one to apply the regulations for handling "unclean" people, we might not have successful hospitals today. Yet, by reading such a powerful book as Leviticus, we get to understand one of the many aspects of God. It (Leviticus) is an example of a written Scripture that is not FOR us, but it is there for our understanding.

Most will admit that they do not use the entire Bible for life application, but each will determine his or her own choice on what applies and what does not. Paul's use of the term "rightly dividing" implies that there are and will be those who DO divide, but not rightly.... while at the same time, there will be those who do not divide at all. When reading through the Scriptures, it's a common practice among Christians to take bits and pieces of various passages to create a message, a sermon, or a life application. Though this does not take away from God's ability to still hold His truth intact, it diminishes our ability to see what's ACTUALLY being said in His Word.

Many presume to have a strong understanding of Scripture when, in fact, no division has been made in their study to determine their understanding. Separating Old and New Testaments is not it, for the Messiah who appeared in Matthew was simply a continuing story from that which was prophesied in

the Old Testament. We cannot generalize division into broad categories, we must pay attention each and every time we open the Word of God and consider whether it is or is not to be applied directly to us.

Consider with me, that much of our understanding comes from the words we have been taught more than the Word we have studied. Even as children in Sunday school, who can deny the many masses of "Bible quizzers" who were trained to answer questions on command? Will God be impressed with how many questions we answered if our answers were not pulled from a "rightly divided" Word? Children certainly know no better and must begin their introduction to the Scriptures in some form or another, but these feats of "command answers" do not and will not impress God that you have the "knowledge of the truth."

There is much more to present on such a topic as this. This is only a foundational concept within the study of the entire canon of Scripture. May this presentation of "rightly dividing" be an initial encouragement toward studying more and listening less. Our decisions on God's Word cannot stem from everything we hear, see, feel, and touch if we have not truly studied it at all.

No math teacher would ever approve a student who decided that he or she would "feel" his or her way through the class instead of studying. Imagine that student trying to "guess" the answers that they could have gotten by spending an extra two hours in their math book.

Surely this article does not do justice to the topic and for that I fall short. Enjoy the journey of discovering what it means to Rightly Divide the Word of Truth. It has changed my life and my comprehension of once complicated things. I have no doubt it can do the same for you.