

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

This verse in II Timothy has always conjured up strange pictures in my mind, “rightly dividing the word of truth,” what does that mean? To the right we find Timothy preparing to rightly divide the word. Seriously, this is not the way the verse should be taken. We might think that no serious Bible student would ever think this meant to cut the Bible with a hatchet. Yet, most of us are questioned daily by people who mistakenly do almost the same as Timothy is doing in this picture. How many times have you heard it said, “That is in the **Old Testament?**” Is this not just hacking the Bible in two?

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It is amazing how we can impose a list of categories upon the Scriptures and totally confuse their meaning by doing so. The categorical divisions of Old Testament and New Testament are absent from the text of the Bible, but those terms have skewed the way many Christians view the Scriptures. The terms can be found within the text, but they are not speaking of a category that Christianity placed on the assembled books several centuries later. Yet, every day people in the Hebrew Roots movement are forced to deal with these artificially imposed distinctions.

Categories artificially create a line of distinction and association. A good example of this comes to us in the discipline of Taxonomy where the plants and animals are separated into various kingdoms, phylum, genus, species, etc. According to these categories, science states that whales and humans are related. I have even heard this given as proof that the Bible has error since it classifies the whale as a fish, not as a mammal. Which is right, Science or the Bible? Most conservative Christians would respond with, “the Bible,” while many liberal Christians and the unbelieving public would respond with, “Science.” This dichotomy can produce many arguments, but both sides are making the same mistake. Both assume the categories are mutually exclusive. Categories are merely categories. They are there to help one record, but are not necessarily representative of absolute truth. We could make a category including all the creatures that have fins. This would include the whale and exclude man, but would include other creatures like some lizards, some birds, the salamander, and several other creatures that are not related in modern taxonomy. Does this mean our new list is wrong? No, it only indicates that lists may not be exclusive of each other and might not represent an eternal truth.

In the Hebrew Roots movement we have begun to look at Scripture in a different light, but our friends have not seen a reason to reevaluate their thinking on the subject. We make statements that seem obvious to us, but to them they sound radical and confused. We must learn how to introduce our information without forcing our friends to polarize the subject like the above fish/mammal debate. Before we present our views, we must also learn good procedure for properly dividing the word of truth for ourselves. It would be a tragedy if we repeated all the mistakes that we discovered were made throughout the history of Christianity. Unfortunately, too often this is the case. Some Hebrew Roots teachers impose the same mistaken structures and previously held opinions upon the text, giving us another skewed view of Scripture. It is important that we continually review our beliefs in light of Scripture and remove all the longstanding external structures that inhibit a clear understanding of the text.

A *scriptural paradigm* is a basic view with which we interpret the Scripture. It is the foundation to our belief, but few recognize that they have a paradigm. Dispensationalism is one of the paradigms within the church that divides the Bible and history into various eras in order to make sense of seemingly conflicting commands and practices. Yet, this totally distorts the meaning of the text allowing one to pick and choose what he wishes to follow. Eternal feasts are rejected because they are in the “Old Testament.” Eternal covenants are changed and some who were previously included are then excluded. Since most Protestant denominations teach, or assume this paradigm within their teaching, we have a very difficult time showing why the law has never ceased to be in effect. Does Timothy mean for us to more correctly divide the word than these that I have mentioned? Maybe if we placed the right divisions, this confusion would dissipate.

The teaching of Dipensationalism is only a few hundred years old. If we go back many centuries we discover another kind of dividing that occurred. When the Hebrew Scriptures were written, there were no spaces between words. The books were originally one long strand of letters. It was as if each book only contained one word. The oldest Greek manuscripts of the Brit Chadasha also had no spacing between words. So one of the first interpretations of Scripture was in separating out the individual words. Today this would be no simple task deciphering the Hebrew Scripture since it did not have vowel points at that time. Some sentences could be read several ways depending on how those word breaks were inserted. This problem did not really exist when this was done because there was a tradition that had been passed down over the generations concerning the proper pronunciation of the text. Only today when trying to reconstruct the way Scripture looked do we have this problem. Without the proper pronunciation we could mistake many variations in a Hebrew root making the text read quite differently.

For an example of how the tradition has helped we can look at Leviticus 23. This chapter gives regulations concerning the festivals of YHWH. In an unpointed text we have no distinction between the word *fire* (isheh) and the word *woman* (ishah). So in verse eight as in other places we find instructions to, “Make an offering of fire to YHWH.” Yet, in an unpointed text it could read, “Make an offering of a woman to YHWH.” Nothing in close proximity to this passage will help you realize the second reading is improper. Only when considering the whole Torah do you recognize that human sacrifice is an abomination. Context extends further than the previous few verses. It sometimes even protrudes beyond the particular book being studied. This example reads either way with the word breaks in place. Think of the misunderstanding one could have without word breaks

and a tradition of pronunciation.

The Greek alphabet had vowels, but still there was no spacing between words. Originally the Greek texts were written using all capital letters. Later scribes changed them to all small letters. Ultimately a text was compiled, which not only separated the words, but used both small and capital letters, and separated it into chapters and verses. Could this have been Paul's subject when he mentioned properly dividing the word of truth? Was he speaking of word divisions and verses?

Truly, I have been playing with English words in like fashion to many preachers who do not reference the text of origin. No, Paul was not speaking of word divisions or enumerating chapters and verses. First we must logically consider why this would not be the case. He was unfamiliar with any of these concepts in the first century, how could he have been speaking about them? There was no word in Hebrew for the word grouping called a *sentence*. The word *devar* meant thing, word, or complete sentence. The Ten Commandments are designated in Scripture, not with the word *mitzvah*, meaning commandment, but with *devar* usually translated as *word*. The Ten Commandments are the ten words. Each commandment was considered one word or statement. This makes sense when you realize that there were no word divisions during that time period. Only beginning with medieval Hebrew did a word come into use, meaning sentence, differentiating it from a single word. It was the word *mishpat* translated in the Bible as *judgment*. This may have facilitated the English association between the word *sentence* referring to "a grouping of words" and *sentence* meaning "an assigned punishment for criminal activity." Paul nor Timothy really had any such thoughts of division in mind when this phrase was written. The Greek text does not use a word that means division. It is only the English text that uses such phraseology.

In middle English when the King James Version was translated, the phrase, "rightly dividing" meant to "correctly handle." Some later versions have translated this as "handling aright." This idiom had no reference what so ever to dividing, cutting or chopping into words verses, chapters or covenants. It did not refer to spacing or enumeration of passages either. It really means to use good techniques in order to properly understand, teach and apply the word of truth.

What is meant by, "using good techniques?" If we do not use proper techniques in reviewing any written word, we may totally misunderstand the intent of the author. Many variations in understanding have come from the same Biblical Text. Two religions claim the Tanakh/Old Testament as the foundation of their beliefs, but those religions are decidedly different. A third religion considers the same text as sacred. So how do we come to such varying conclusions from the same text? Much of the variance results from using improper techniques of interpretation. First, the Brit Chadasha should always be interpreted in continuum with the Tanakh. Many think they do this, but their dispensationalism is evidence they do not.

One should never disregard the language and culture of the people who wrote a text when attempting to understand its contents. Without considering the language we will make monumental mistakes. Using the "English only," often reveals that we do not know our own language very well. We often argue vehemently over the meaning of a word only to choose a definition not meant by the text. I was intentionally doing this when discussing the English phrase, "rightly dividing." An idiomatic usage was falsely being interpreted as being literal. Doing so confuses the meaning of the text. Once we begin to recognize that language and culture make a difference, we open ourselves up

to a better understanding of the Bible. However that alone will not mean we are “rightly dividing the word of truth.”

There are historical rules that have been established for interpreting texts. These rules have developed over the centuries, but one needs to use the rules that were applicable at

the time of writing. The science of interpreting meaning from a written text is called hermeneutics. If we do not use sound rules, we will skew the meaning. Imposing any modern understanding upon a text will bring confusion. This was done in this article with “rightly dividing.” This idiom is not common today, so a modern thinking was imposed upon the text. There are many such terms, phrases and grammatical nuances that are understood differently today and hide the original message. Considering that there are so many ways to distort the meaning of the Bible, we need to study to show ourselves approved. It is time we learned the methods and how to use the available tools to properly extract the gold that God left us in Scripture. The Scriptures tell us, “*It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, But the glory of kings is to search out a matter.*” (^{NKJV} **Proverbs 25:2**). It is time for each one of us to learn how to use the tools and hone the skills to become kings for the King of Kings.

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