

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

***“Study to shew
thyself approved
unto God, a
workman that
needeth not to be
ashamed, rightly
dividing the word
of truth.”***

—II Timothy 2:15

THE WORDS OF OUR OPEN-

ing scripture should be of great importance to sincere students of the Bible. According to *Strong's Concordance*, the Greek word here translated “study” means “to make effort, be prompt or earnest.” The thought contained in this definition is that such “study” is for the purpose of showing ourselves approved unto God, and that this can only be done through “rightly dividing the word of truth.” Thus Paul recognized the need for diligence in Bible study.

In this text, Paul indicates the proper motive for Bible study—that we might know the will of God, show ourselves approved unto him, and be fervent in our spirit of serving as his “workman.” Bible study is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, which is to know and to do God’s will. As Paul points out, we show ourselves approved unto God in proportion to our rightly dividing the Word of

truth, and working in harmony with the instructions thus revealed to us.

What is meant by “rightly dividing the word of truth?” Paul’s use of this expression is found in a very interesting and revealing context. The preceding verse reads, “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.” (II Tim. 2:14) The three verses following the admonition to rightly divide the Word of truth read, “Shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some.”—vss. 16-18

From these verses, we learn that striving about words and vain babblings does not constitute profitable Bible study. Additionally, those who were teaching that the resurrection of the dead had already taken place were not “rightly dividing the word of truth.” It might well have been the teaching of this error in the Early Church that prompted Paul to use the particular expression, “rightly dividing the word of truth.” The Bible does teach the resurrection of the dead, but the error at that time was the claim that it was a feature of God’s plan which was in the past, rather than in the future.

The lesson here emphasized is the importance of recognizing the time element in God’s arrangements. Failure to understand this has led many to conclude that the Bible is contradictory and unreliable. The Scriptures identify three main time divisions in

the plan of God. In a very general way we might speak of these as “the world of yesterday,” “the world of today,” and “the world of tomorrow.” The Bible uses the expressions, “The world that then was,” “this present evil world,” and “the world to come.”—II Pet. 3:6; Gal. 1:4; Heb. 2:5

The first two of these worlds are predominantly evil. The third is described by Peter as a “new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” (II Pet. 3:13) Concerning the “present evil world,” we read, “Now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered.” (Mal. 3:15) Failure to recognize that God is now permitting evil to flourish, and that his time for the establishment of righteousness in the earth is in “the world to come,” has led to various erroneous concepts of the divine arrangement, and of God’s will for his people at the present time.

FOUR AGES

Within these larger divisions of time there are shorter periods, which we usually refer to as “ages”. There was the Patriarchal Age, which began at the time of the Flood, and ended with the death of Jacob. During that age, God was dealing with the patriarchs Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. His promises were to them, particularly beginning with Abraham. He did not try to convert the world at that time.

Then, beginning with the death of Jacob, came the Jewish Age, so titled because during that period God’s dealings were exclusively with the nation of Israel. Through the Prophet Amos, God

said to Israel, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth.” (Amos 3:2) He gave this nation his Law, and sent his prophets to them. He promised to send the Messiah to this nation, the great Deliverer who would be of the tribe of Judah, and of the royal house of David. It was not God’s purpose to convert the world during this period of his exclusive dealings with Israel. By means of the Law and other measures, God held the nation together until the Messiah did come. However, they rejected Christ, their Messiah, and lost the great privilege of any longer being God’s exclusive people. A new age then began, during which the divine purpose in the earth has been carried out through the preaching of the Gospel—hence we call it the Gospel Age.

The Gospel Age also has not been a time for the conversion of the world in general, but for reaching a particular group of people. God has been calling out from the world a “little flock” to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, that in the “world to come” they might live and reign with him in his kingdom. To understand this has a tremendously important bearing on our understanding of what constitutes the will of God for his people during this present age.

The first thousand years in the world to come we refer to as the Messianic Age. This is the age of Christ’s kingdom. It is the period during which the world will be converted, and all the willing and obedient will be restored to perfection of human life, and have an opportunity of living forever on a perfected earth. Many are the promises of God relating to this glorious climax of his plan. If we

are to know the will of God for us at the present time, it is essential to recognize when these promises apply and to whom. Only thus we can be “rightly dividing” the time features of his glorious plan.

DIFFERENT REWARDS

Paul’s use of the expression, “rightly dividing the word of truth,” not only relates to the time features of God’s plan, but also can properly be applied to other important facts in connection with his divine purposes. For example, there are both earthly and heavenly promises in the Bible. There are promises of earthly blessings in the Old Testament which speak of building houses and planting vineyards. (Isa. 65:21,22) Some, not understanding the plan of God, and therefore not “rightly dividing the word of truth,” have endeavored to spiritualize promises like this, and imagine some type of dwellings being built in heaven, and of spiritual vines and fig trees growing there as well.

On the other hand, Jesus said to his disciples, “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.” (John 14:2,3) This is a most precious promise for all true followers of the Master, but many have supposed that it applies to all who will be saved in every age. Failing to rightly divide the Word of truth along this line takes away the vital meaning of such admonitions as, “Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth,” hence the true incentive for this effort is more or less nullified.—Col. 3:2

SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE

To be able to distinguish the difference between the symbolic and the literal language of the Bible is also important in rightly dividing the Word of truth. Failure in this has led many to suppose that God intends to destroy the earth with literal fire, and to torment forever all those who do not accept Christ before they die. This distorts the wisdom, justice, love, and power of God, and their chief motive for serving him is fear rather than love. It is true that many try to love God in spite of their gross misconceptions concerning him.

How beautiful is the symbolic language of the Bible as it is used in his promises to his people, and also in connection with the outworking of his plan of the ages. The psalmist wrote, "I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust. Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler."—Ps. 91:2-4

TO WHOM ADDRESSED

In rightly dividing the Word of truth, it is also important to note to whom any particular text of scripture is addressed. We have an outstanding example of this in the epistles of the New Testament. Well-meaning people often quote from these epistles when referring to matters of the world, such as politics, social issues, and other secular matters. However, these epistles are addressed exclusively to the earnest footstep followers of Jesus, and are designed to guide, strengthen, and comfort them.

For example, the Epistle to the Romans is addressed to “all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints.”—Rom. 1:7

What is true of the New Testament epistles is also true of other portions of Scripture. Indeed, the Bible was not written to guide the political and social activities of the nations, but as a light for the guidance of those who have dedicated themselves wholly to the doing of God’s will. To recognize this makes the entire Word of God more precious, giving an assurance that in it is a personal message to us from our loving Heavenly Father.

This particular principle in Bible study is of even greater value to us when fully applied in our life. For example, the Prophet Isaiah spoke of the bread and water of the Lord’s people being sure. (Isa. 33:15,16) Many followers of the Master have taken this to mean that the Lord will never permit them to go hungry, when as a matter of fact, many have experienced hunger. The Apostle Paul himself, writing to the brethren at Philippi, said, “I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.”—Phil. 4:12

There can be no question concerning Paul’s faithfulness to the Lord. He was not permitted to go “hungry” as a punishment for unfaithfulness. It was simply that God saw that it would be appropriate for Paul, as a New Creature in Christ Jesus, to have his flesh suffer the pangs of hunger. What, then, did the Prophet Isaiah mean by the promise that bread and water would be sure to the righteous?

This particular promise pertained to God's faithful people of a different age, a people who were being dealt with by God under the terms of the Law Covenant. Under that covenant, God had promised to bless his faithful people in basket and in store. (Deut. 28:5) It was not a covenant of sacrifice, but a covenant which promised earthly blessings of health and life for those who were faithful. Nevertheless, the people of Israel disobeyed God repeatedly and as a consequence, were chastised accordingly.

However, the situation with the Lord's people of the Gospel Age is different. We have covenanted to lay down our lives in sacrifice. (Ps. 50:5) Jesus, our Head and Exemplar, laid down his life. There was no other way for him to be faithful to his Heavenly Father but to sacrifice his all, as a man, which he did. We have been invited to suffer and to die with him. The providences of God in our lives must be interpreted from this standpoint, else there is a possibility that we might become discouraged by our failure to receive the blessings which we may have supposed God had promised.

Jesus said to his true followers of this Gospel Age, "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father [his knowledge]. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered." (Matt. 10:29,30) Surely this denotes a very careful and loving watchcare by the Heavenly Father over the affairs of his children. Note that Jesus did not say sparrows never fall, and that nothing ever happens to the hairs of our head. It is simply that even unimportant things in our experiences are known to the

Heavenly Father, and are taken into consideration in his dealings with us.

“My God shall supply all your need,” wrote Paul, “according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 4:19) We can depend upon this promise, but we must be willing to allow the Lord to decide what our needs may be. These are the needs of the New Creature, not necessarily the needs of the flesh, although the flesh is closely related to the New Creature. Indeed, while still this side of the veil, the flesh is the dwelling place of the New Creature—the only body the New Creature possesses.

God has certain purposes to accomplish in and through his people. For this reason, he might preserve the health of our “earthen vessel” for a while, and see to it that we have necessary food and raiment. He does not do this to interfere with the carrying out of our covenant of sacrifice, but to keep us “fit” while we are laying down our lives in his service. These are matters which are in the Father’s hands. The point we are to remember is that his promises to us are spiritual, not earthly. The blessings which we can be sure of receiving unstintingly from him are those which pertain to our spiritual, not our human, existence.

If we rightly divide the Word of truth we will recognize this difference, and will be prepared to accept with gratitude and praise whatever experiences the Lord, in his wisdom and love, sees best for us as New Creatures in Christ Jesus. He may permit us to have bread and water in abundance, yet our stomachs may not be in a sufficiently healthy state to digest food, and our bodies might starve for the need of nourishment. On the other

hand, he might permit us to have healthy stomachs, but not give us all the food we may think we need. The result would be much the same in both cases. Our Heavenly Father knows best. We are laying down our lives, and if God wishes to accept our final offering on an altar of hunger, we should rejoice. However, we can be sure that this will not occur until the Lord sees that it is the due time, both from the standpoint of his plan, and our own readiness to complete our earthly course.

We have stressed the point of food as an illustration. This principle applies to all of God's dealings with us. As fleshly beings we would like to think that he is so overruling in our affairs that nothing can happen to us of an unpleasant nature—that every detail of life will work out smoothly and happily. This, however, is not the will of God for us. He may permit us to be sorely tried along some lines—through illness, or hardships of other kinds. If so, it is because he sees that such experiences are best to prepare us for the place he has for us in the kingdom. Let us recognize this, thankfully accept God's providences, and thus show ourselves approved by him through rightly dividing the Word of truth with regard to this aspect of our Christian lives.

THE HOUSES OF ISRAEL

Noting to whom the promises and the prophecies of the Bible apply is also a great help in our understanding of the plan of God as a whole. During the Gospel Age, those who claim to be followers of Jesus look to him as their Head—their Lord and Master. The promises of God to these are

wonderful and precious. However, this body of professed believers in Christ, while still in the flesh, is made up of both “Israelites indeed” and nominal believers—that is, believers in name only. Both of these groups are addressed in the Scriptures.

A good example of this is found in the messages to the seven churches as recorded in chapters 2 and 3 of the Book of Revelation. While complimenting the church at Pergamos, the Lord added, “I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate. Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.”—Rev. 2:14-16

The promises of a crown of life, of sitting on the throne with Jesus, of being given a white stone, and being made a pillar in the temple of God, as contained in other portions of these messages to the churches, were not made to those who followed the example of Balaam. These were warnings of punishments from the Lord, and yet they are all classed as being in “the church.” These messages to the seven churches reveal that God has permitted the true Christians—Israelites indeed—and the nominal Christians—those in name only—to exist together throughout the age. The world has seen little or no difference. Only the Lord, who knows the heart, has discerned this difference, and he rewards and punishes in keeping with his justice and love. It is important for us to recognize that

there are these two classes, and on this point to rightly divide the Word of truth.

The same thing is true with respect to natural Israel. We read of Moses that he “was faithful in all his house.” (Heb. 3:2) Just as in the house of sons during its course of development some have been faithful and some have not, even so was it with the house of servants over which Moses was the head. Here, also, the promises of God to the faithful are quite different from those to the unfaithful, which in many instances are more in the nature of warnings than of promises.

Moses wrote, “The LORD said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him.” (Deut. 18:17-19) The Apostle Peter quoted this promise, and indicated that it would be fulfilled following the Second Coming of Christ in the kingdom.—Acts 3:19-23

This warning was made, not to the faithful of Israel, but to the faithless and unbelieving. The Israelites had entered into the Law Covenant, but many were already displaying a lack of faith concerning it, and were rebellious against the providences of the Lord. Throughout the entire Jewish Age there was this group within Israel. God loved them and was merciful to them. He will eventually show his mercy to them through sending them “that Prophet” who will richly bless them in

the Messianic kingdom with restitution to human perfection—that is, as many of them as then hear and obey that great Prophet. Those who do not hear and obey will be destroyed from among the people.—Acts 3:23

During that same period of time—indeed, going all the way back to righteous Abel—there was another class, a faithful class. Perhaps, at times, it could hardly be called a class, but just individuals who displayed their faith in God and in his promises in spite of the trials and difficulties this fidelity entailed. Paul speaks of these in the 11th chapter of Hebrews. He explained that they endured their afflictions in order to obtain “a better resurrection.” (vs. 35) They evidently understood that if faithful to God, even unto death, he would have something better for them in the resurrection.

This is indicated in Paul’s speech to the Roman governor, Felix, in which he said, “This I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets: And have hope toward God, which they themselves also allow [await], that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust.” (Acts 24:14,15) This “Ancient Worthy” class evidently knew about the resurrection of the just. It was this that they looked upon as the “better resurrection,” and their desire was to be faithful to the Lord in order to be found worthy of being brought forth in that resurrection.

Doubtless all of that “Ancient Worthy” class who lived following the giving of the Law to Israel were greatly inspired by the promise in which God assured

the faithful that they would be “a peculiar treasure” and “an holy nation.” (Exod. 19:5,6) While the nation as such did not qualify under the terms of this promise—being largely ignored by the “nominal” Israelites—it served as an incentive to those who sought earnestly to know and to do God’s will.

The fact that these two classes existed prior to the First Advent of Jesus means that some portions of the Scriptures refer to one class and some to the other. To discern the correct lessons which the Lord is teaching us through the Scriptures, we need to take note of which class it is that is being discussed, or to which class the promises or warnings are being given. Thus we will have no difficulty in discerning the position of the Ancient Worthies, and of Israel as a whole, in the plan of God.

RIGHTLY DIVIDING KINGDOM PROMISES

The word “kingdom” is one of the prominent words in the Bible. There was, of course, the kingdom of Israel, and there are the kingdoms of this world. However, we have in mind, in particular, the kingdom of the Lord. In many of the prophecies of the Old Testament, the Lord’s kingdom is referred to, but the word itself is not used. In Isaiah 25:6-9, the kingdom is symbolized by a “mountain” in which the Lord makes unto all people a “feast of fat things,” and in which he “swallow[s] up death in victory.” In Isaiah 9:6,7, the kingdom is described as a “government.”

While in a general way all these, and many other references in the Bible, apply to the same kingdom, they do not always refer to the same aspect of the kingdom. For example, when Jesus admonished

his disciples to seek first the kingdom of heaven, his reference was to a position of rulership in the Lord's kingdom. When, in Luke 12:32, we read Jesus' words, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom," the same thing is true.

In contrast to this, most of the kingdom promises of the Old Testament describe blessings which will be received by the subjects of the Lord's kingdom. It is important, in rightly dividing the Word of truth concerning the kingdom, to note this distinction if we are to get the full force of what is meant. It is also important to note that some of the passages of the Bible in which the word "kingdom" is used, refer to the future rulers in that kingdom while they are being prepared for that high position. Only by noting these distinctions will we be able to see and to appreciate the full harmony of the Word of God with respect to its teachings on the subject of the kingdom of the Lord.

OURSELVES APPROVED

Let us ever remember that the main purpose of Bible study is that we might know the will of God for ourselves, and receive inspiration to faithfulness in the doing of his will. One important aspect of the divine will for his people during the present age is that we may be coworkers with him, bearing testimony to the Gospel of Christ—the great and precious truths of God's plan. Indeed, our opening text says we are to be workmen who need not to be ashamed because we have rightly divided the Word of truth.

To bear witness to the truths of God's glorious plan, we should know those truths and how they

are set forth in the Word of God. Thus, every truth in the Bible is related to our knowing and doing God's will. It is important, then, that we rightly divide the Word of truth from the standpoint of time, noting its earthly and heavenly promises, and its use of literal and symbolic language.

Let us note also to whom the various promises of God are directed, and what those promises mean which apply directly to his faithful "little flock" of the Gospel Age. Let us remember that we are seeking a place as kings and priests with Jesus in his kingdom, and rejoice that it is the Father's good pleasure for us to attain such a position. Let us also rejoice in the blessings which will come to mankind in general as subjects of the kingdom. May we be faithful in proclaiming these glorious truths far and wide, to all who will hear!

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