

RIGHT DIVISION

By CHARLES H. WELCH

An explanation of the principle enjoined in 2 Timothy 2:15, particularly addressed to those who may be seeking some simple outline of its meaning, application and goal.

A cause of stumbling explained.

One of the most fruitful causes of misunderstanding of the Scriptures among those who are saved is the failure to distinguish things that differ, or, as Paul puts it in 2 Timothy 2:15, failure 'rightly to divide the Word of truth'. The words of Miles Coverdale are much to the point here:

*'It shall greatly helpe ye to understande Scripture,
if thou mark
not only what is spoken, or wrytten,
but of whom,
and to whom,
with what words,
at what time,
where,
to what intent,
with what circumstance,
considering what goeth before, and what followeth'.*

The principle of right division.

What are we to understand by the term 'rightly dividing'? The word in question is *orthotomounta*, which is made up of *orthos* 'right', and *temno*, 'to cut'. The word *apotemno* occurs in the Septuagint Version of Jeremiah 36:23, where Jehoiakim *wrongly* cut up or divided the Word of truth. We mention this because it shows that the idea of 'cutting' and 'dividing' is an essential part of the word. The Septuagint supplies us with another helpful passage, for in Proverbs 3:5,6 we read:

*'Trust in the LORD with all thine heart,
And lean not unto thine own understanding.
In all thy ways acknowledge Him,
And He shall RIGHTLY DIVIDE thy paths'.*

Here we have a close parallel with 2 Timothy 2:15. In both cases the fear of man and the assistance of man are put aside, and the Lord divides or opens up aright the tangled pathway. There are some who would turn the edge of 2 Timothy 2:15 by rendering it 'Cutting a straight pathway along the Word of truth'. Now although this is good advice, it is false interpretation. It is the Word itself that has to be divided in this passage, not the pathway of the believer.

Failure regarding this principle leads to subversion.

The Galatian church, recently brought out of pagan darkness into the light of grace, were easily intimidated by the Judaisers who descended upon them quoting chapter and verse to prove that, apart from the law of Moses and circumcision, they could not be saved. Had they known the great principle of 2 Timothy 2:15 they might have recognised the deception. A realisation of the distinction between 'law' and 'grace' would have made it clear that the mere quotation of Scripture was not sufficient.

`Chapter and verse' is not enough.

These Judaisers could quote `chapter and verse' for their teaching, but the point was that the dispensation had changed. The apostle Paul, referring to *the very law of God* from this aspect, calls its precepts and ordinances `weak and beggarly elements' (Gal. 4:9). If the Holy Spirit can speak in this way of the very ordinances given by God when they are applied in an undispensational way, the reader should not rest satisfied with current opinions concerning the Church and its ordinances, until he is sure that such are not only to be found somewhere in Scripture, but also in that part of Scripture that applies specifically to the present time. In other words, he must `rightly divide the Word of truth'.

Right division and the gospel.

Passing on to another important reason for `right division' we would point out that we shall not be clear about the gospel, if we are uncertain about dispensational truth. Many seem to think that a knowledge of the different dispensations is unessential; all they feel called upon to do is to `preach the gospel'. Without questioning the worthiness of their motives, we should be justified in asking, Which gospel? The word translated `gospel' in the New Testament means `good news'. The Word itself does not tell us to whom the good news is addressed, nor what the good news is about. The following `gospels' are mentioned in Scripture:

- The *gospel* or good news of the KINGDOM.
- The *gospel* or good news of God concerning HIS SON.
- The *gospel* or good news of the CIRCUMCISION.
- The *gospel* or good news of the UNCIRCUMCISION.
- The *gospel* or good news of the GRACE OF GOD.
- The *gospel* or good news of the GLORY OF CHRIST.
- The *gospel* or good news of the GLORY OF THE BLESSED GOD.
- The EVERLASTING (*eonian*) *gospel* or good news.

We may illustrate our meaning by taking the extreme case of the `everlasting (*eonian*) gospel', which is found in Revelation 14:6,7. This `gospel' has nothing to say about the very essentials of the gospel which we have received. There is not a word as to faith, justification, redemption, or pardon. Its terms are:

`Fear God, and give glory to Him; for the hour of His judgment is come: and worship Him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of the waters'.

It is a message of `good news' to the nations on the earth under the awful reign of Antichrist. To these people the angel preaches this special gospel, calling upon them to give glory to God, and to worship Him as *Creator*.

The gospel as preached by Peter and by Paul.

Again, take the expressions of Galatians 2:7, `the gospel of the uncircumcision' and `the gospel of the circumcision'. It is not the same gospel sent to different hearers; it is not the gospel *to* the circumcision, but the gospel *of* the circumcision. Paul tells us that when he went up to Jerusalem, and `communicated unto them *that* gospel which he preached among the Gentiles', the apostles at Jerusalem were perfectly satisfied that the gospel which Paul preached had the authority of God equally with that preached by Peter. Peter tells us in Acts 15:7 that the message he delivered to Cornelius was `the gospel'. If we turn to Acts 10 we shall discover what this `gospel' was. Peter's opening words are enough to tell us that we are to hear a message very different from the gospel preached by Paul:

`Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth Him, and *worketh righteousness*, is accepted with Him' (Acts 10:34,35).

Place these words beside Titus 3:5 :

`*Not by works of righteousness* which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us'.

Peter commences with the preaching of John the Baptist and the earthly life of the Lord Jesus, and concludes with the `remission of sins'. The character of Cornelius (`a devout man', one who `prayed to God always') is quite different from that of the `ungodly', the `sinners' and `enemies' (Rom. 5) to whom the apostle Paul directs his message of salvation.

Different administrations do not imply contradictions.

We cannot deal here with the further differences that are clearly discernible between the ministries of Peter and Paul, but we feel sure the reader will agree that, if a special message has been sent through the apostle of the Gentiles, *that* should be the gospel for the time in which *we* live, and not the gospel of the kingdom or the gospel of the circumcision. Needless to say there are no `discrepancies' here. Peter is perfectly right in Acts 10. Paul is perfectly right in Titus 3. Both are inspired and both are true, but Peter's message would be *untrue* in Titus 3 or Ephesians 2, even though it was true in the Pentecostal period, simply because the dispensation had been changed, and a new order inaugurated.

Some simple illustrations of `wrong division'.

The chapter headings of our English Bible supply a good example of `wrongly dividing' the Word of truth. At the beginning of Isaiah 29 we read: `God's heavy judgment upon Jerusalem. The senselessness and deep hypocrisy of the Jews'. At the beginning of the very next chapter (Isa. 30) we read: `God's mercies towards His Church'. In Isaiah 29:1 we read of `the city where David dwelt', and in Isaiah 30:19 of `the people dwelling *in Zion at Jerusalem*'. Yet, while the judgments are reserved for the Jew, the blessings in the same passages are appropriated by the church. If we will but look for ourselves, we may at once discover the people *to whom*, and *concerning whom*, this prophecy was written, for in Isaiah 1:1 we read: `The vision of Isaiah, the son of Amoz, which he saw *concerning Judah and Jerusalem*'.

All Scripture is for us, but not necessarily about us.

This appropriation, or rather misappropriation, of Scriptures written concerning Israel and the Kingdom is a fruitful source of confusion among believers. Think of the many who have stumbled over the Epistle of James. Those who have seen `justification by faith, without legal works of any kind' to be vital to the integrity of the gospel of grace (Gal. 2:16), have had considerable difficulty in deciding what to do with the teaching of James. Some have laboured to `harmonize' the teaching of James and the teaching of Paul. Others, seeing the futility of this, have discredited the Epistle of James. Luther called it an `epistle of straw'; while others, of equal orthodoxy, have questioned its canonicity. On the other hand, there are those - to whom the emphasis upon works is more palatable than Paul's emphasis upon grace - who have used James to `water down' the teaching of Romans or Ephesians.

The address on the envelope.

If we will but rightly divide the Word of truth, all this `vain jangling' will cease. *We* are saved Gentiles. *We* have never been connected with the people or promises of Israel. God has sent to *us* an apostle, the apostle `*for you Gentiles*', and we are responsible for the way in which we receive His message. James did not write his epistle to saved Gentiles, nor to the `church which is the body of Christ'. As the first verse of the epistle tells us, he wrote `to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad'. If any reader is a member of one or other of these twelve tribes, he may perhaps feel that the epistle has a word for him, although even in that case we hope to show that the dispensation in which we find ourselves (whether Jewish or Gentile believers) is not directly in view in this epistle. If the reader is a believer of the Gentiles, then although he may learn much and profit much by reading this epistle, only confusion will result unless he rightly divides the Word of truth. If we consider the `address on the envelope' a little more closely, we shall not be found appropriating the promises and blessings of others, and confusing our own hopes.

Suppose a father, having several sons, sends to them letters containing advice, words of encouragement, and promises of help and reward. We can quite understand that one son, John, would be glad to read the letter written to his brother William, and *vice versa*. Each would doubtless find much in the letter written from their father to the other that would be profitable, but neither would think of claiming the promises made to the other, nor of obeying the other's instructions. If John were a bank clerk, and William an artist, the instructions given to the brother in the bank would be of no service to the brother at his easel. So it is with the children of God. The same Father in heaven has many sons. All the messages of love, cheer, hope, instruction and warning may be profitably read by all, but each one must see that the words sent *to* him and written *about* him, are duly considered and placed foremost.

The `Gap' in Scripture.

Another fruitful cause of misunderstanding is forgetfulness or ignorance of the fact that this present dispensation is `the dispensation of the mystery (or secret) which had been hidden away from all ages and generations by God' (Eph. 3:9 Author's translation).

The Lord Jesus, at the commencement of His ministry as recorded in Luke 4:16-20, shows very clearly the principle which we seek to emphasize. Entering the synagogue at Nazareth, He stood up and read Isaiah 61:1,2. The point to be noticed, however, is that the Lord did not complete the second verse. Immediately upon reading the words, `the acceptable year of the Lord', He *closed the Book*. Why did the Lord stop just at this point? Why did He not read on to the end of the verse? The reason is that the next words belong to a *yet future dispensation*. The Lord was about to make an important statement. His words were: `This day is *this* Scripture fulfilled in your ears'. This could not have been said if He had read on and included the words, `the day of vengeance of our God'. The day of vengeance will not be ushered in until the Lord Jesus steps forward and opens another book, as recorded in Revelation 5 and 6.

The present dispensation a parenthesis.

So far as dispensational truth is concerned, we have to remember the `closed book', and to see that this present dispensation comes in between the `acceptable year of the Lord', and the `day of vengeance of our God'. The Lord seems to have given a hint of an impending change in the words which He spoke to the people after the incident cited above. He emphasized the fact that although there were many widows and many lepers in Israel, yet it was a *Gentile* leper, and a *Gentile* widow that were blessed, as recorded in the Scriptures. The `gap' and the emphasis upon *Gentile* blessing come together in this chapter in a way that demands careful consideration. So also with other prophets who wrote beforehand of `the sufferings of Christ, and the glory which should follow' (1 Pet. 1:10,11). So far as we can tell from their writings, there was nothing to guide them as to whether days or centuries would come between the `sufferings' and the `glory'.

Israel, the key to dispensational truth.

Starting from the call of Abraham in Genesis 12, the history of *one people* occupies the whole of the Old Testament. This fact needs no detailed proof, for it is recognised by all who know the Scriptures. It is not so clearly seen, however, even by students of the Word, that the presence or absence of the people of Israel is a sign of dispensational importance, or that the place where Israel pass off the scene, and where the dispensation changes, is neither at the commencement of the New Testament, the beginning or middle of the Acts, but after the conference that Paul had with leaders of the Jews at Rome as recorded in Acts 28.

Israel, and the earthly ministry of the Lord.

The reader of the `Gospels' is acquainted at every turn with the fact that the Lord Jesus `Came to His own'. His genealogy is given so that it may be known that He was the Seed of David and of Abraham (Matt. 1). Wise men enquire where He should be born that is `King of the Jews', and they are directed to the royal city of Bethlehem (Matt. 2). The Lord limits the ministry of the Twelve to the `Lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matt. 10:6), which limitation He announced was true of His own ministry at the time (Matt. 15:24). Many prepared to go so far with us, part company at the opening of the Acts, for the tradition that `The church began at Pentecost' seems as ingrained as the tradition of the Elders, and as certainly prevents those who entertain it to appreciate the truth for the time now present.

Israel, and its place in the Acts.

The hope of Israel meets us in the first chapter of the Acts, and awaits us in the last chapter. After being instructed by the risen Christ out of the Scriptures, the apostles' one question, when the opportunity presented itself, was:

`Wilt Thou at this time restore again the *kingdom* to *Israel*?' (Acts 1:6).

Neither the apostles' question or the Lord's answer can be construed into anything to do with the `Church'. But, says one, the next chapter does speak of the formation of the Church on the day of Pentecost. Let us `search and see'.

`There were dwelling at Jerusalem *Jews*, devout men, out of every nation under heaven' (Acts. 2:5).

These `Jews' were amazed to hear the apostles speak in the language in which they had been born, but that does not alter the fact that they were `Jews'. Peter also recognizes their nationality, addressing them as `Men of Judaea', `Men of Israel', `Men and brethren', and `All the house of Israel', and refers to the prophecies of Joel and of David, but never once does he utter a word that would suggest the presence of a Gentile. Indeed, his attitude as late as Acts 10:28 makes the presence of a Gentile at Pentecost a logical impossibility.

We find the hope of Israel stressed in Acts 3:19-26, where Peter links the second coming of Christ with Israel's repentance, and the restitution of all things that had been spoken by the prophets since Moses. `Jews only', obtained up to Acts 11:19, and in the very last chapter we find Paul bound `for the hope of Israel' (Acts 28:20).

What is true of the Acts is true of the epistles of the period. `The Jew first' (Rom. 1:16), the Gentile believer a wild olive grafted contrary to nature into the olive tree of Israel (Rom. 11:17). Such is the testimony of Romans, the last epistle of the period.

Israel, and the prophecy of Isaiah 6.

When Israel rejected the Lord in Matthew 11 and 12 we find in the following chapter both the quotation of Isaiah 6:9,10, and the first occurrence of the word `mystery'. When Israel manifested their continued unbelief in Acts 28, there we meet the final quotation of Isaiah 6:9,10 in the New Testament, and with the prison ministry of the apostle we enter into the dispensation of the `Mystery'. The change is marked by the words:

`The salvation of God is *sent* unto the Gentiles' (Acts 28:28).

The salvation of God had originally been *sent* to Israel (Acts 10:36); under the ministry of reconciliation it had been *sent* to both Jew and Gentile (Acts 13:26); but in Acts 28:28 it was for the first time in Biblical history *sent to the Gentile independently of Israel*. This marks a dispensational boundary. Here the apostle entered into his prison ministry.

Israel, absent from the prison ministry of Paul.

In Acts 20:17-27 the apostle made known that one ministry had come to an end, and another - associated with `bonds' - awaited him. In Acts 26:16 the apostle revealed that he had known throughout that he was to exercise a twofold ministry, and had awaited the promised second appearing of the Lord. The prison epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon and 2 Timothy) contain the revelation of the Mystery which had been given to Paul as the prisoner of Jesus Christ for the Gentiles (Eph. 3:1-13; Col 1:23-27).

By the application of the principle of `right division' we are enabled to distinguish between the dealings of God with men while Israel are a people before Him, and His dealings with men when Israel have passed off the scene.

During the first ministry of the apostle, we find the promise to Abraham, the New Covenant, and the reconciliation of the world; but in his prison ministry, Abraham is never mentioned, and no covenant, whether old or new, is spoken of. On the other hand the reconciliation of the Church (Eph. 2), and the reconciliation of all things in heaven and earth (Col. 1), is opened up. In this new ministry we are taken back `before the foundation of the world', and taken up `far above all' to be `seated together' in the heavenlies in Christ.

Dispensational truth needs every statement of Scripture.

The right division of the Word of truth does no violence to a single word of inspired truth; it does not misappropriate a single promise made to other callings; it does not confuse `Jew' with `Gentile', `kingdom' with `church', `earth' with `heaven'; it needs every statement of truth unaltered and unimpaired. When one has experienced the results of `spiritualizing' the Scriptures, and thereby often obliterating the ancient landmarks, this fact, that a rightly divided Word leaves every word unaltered, and every promise undisturbed, should commend its application to all who value the truth above reputation, usefulness or even fellowship.

Conclusion.

Much more could be written on this important subject, but we hope that sufficient has been put forward to show that it is necessary to take into account the varied manners and times, dispensations and economies that qualify the different commands and promises. By thus apportioning the Word of truth with respect to the Jew, the Gentile, and the Dispensation of the Mystery, the reader will obtain a grasp of its wonderful harmony, perceive something of the `manifold' grace that pervades the whole of God's purposes, and find himself approved unto God, a workman having no need to be ashamed, *rightly dividing the Word of truth.*

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