

“Rightly Dividing the Bible”

Part I

Many people read the Bible, but turn away from it because they don't understand it. A lot of people struggle to comprehend what the Bible is saying. In fact, so go so far as to say the Bible is a book that CANNOT be understood; either because it's so old and archaic or because it is veiled in obscure language and vague symbols. Neither of those statements is true. I believe the Bible CAN be understood. I don't claim to understand everything there is to understand about it; I suppose I'll study it all of my life, and will continue to learn more about it as long as I live. But I do believe that the Bible is a practical book and its message and its precepts can be understood by anybody. I don't believe that you have to have some kind of a priest or church order to interpret it for you. It is a message that is placed in the hands of ordinary men and women that can understand and follow it and be saved.

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

Paul is telling the young preacher to apply himself. That's what the word “*study*” in this passage really means. Paul says for him to apply himself to understanding or “*rightly dividing*” the scriptures. That is such a needful admonition to a lot of preachers and teachers today, to a lot of Bible students in general. A lot of people can do a very good job of dividing the Bible; they just have a hard time putting it back together again.

I heard about an old farmer years ago, who decided that he wanted to become a preacher. So, the story says he went down to the elders at the old church where he attended, and he told them he felt like he ought to be out preaching. They were a little skeptical to say the least, and one of them asked him, “Do you know enough about the Bible to be a preacher?” He said, “Oh, yes sir.” Another one asked him, “What part of the Bible do you know the best?” He said, “Oh, well, I love the book of the parables.”

The elders knew what a parable was, but they were a little puzzled by that expression, so one of them asked, “What do you mean by ‘the book of the parables?’” The farmer said, “You've never read the book of the parables? It goes something like this: A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and as he went on his way, he fell among the thorns and the thorns sprang up and almost choked him half to death. And the man said, “I will arise,” and he arose and as he went on his way, he found a donkey. He climbed up on the donkey and continued his journey until he came riding under the low-hanging branches of a tree and got caught there by his long hair. He hung there for forty days and forty nights, and the ravens fed him. Finally, Delilah saw him and she took out her shears and cut him down. He fell on stony ground and great was the fall thereof. And he said, “I will arise,” and he arose. As he went on his way, he came to a wall and there sat Jezebel on the wall. The man said to those standing around, “Cast her down!” and they cast her down. He said, “Cast her down again!” and they cast her down again. He said, “Cast her down seventy times seven!” So they cast her down seventy times seven, and twelve

basketfuls of fragments remained. And he said, “Verily, I say, whose wife will she be in the resurrection?””

Well, you know, ALL of that—in one form or another—is in the Bible. But, of course, it’s not exactly that way. We laugh, but that’s just about how some people treat the word of God. They fail to rightly divide it. As I said a moment ago, they know how to divide the Bible, so to speak, but they don’t know how to get it back together again. They don’t know how to study and interpret the scripture. As a result, they make it contradict itself or cause it to not make any sense. But, you know, when you sincerely open up the pages of God’s word and you simply allow it to speak, it has a beautiful, simple, yet powerful message.

There are people who devote their lives to theology, to a study of God’s word. Any Bible student is, in a sense, a theologian: we all want to study, learn and understand the word of God. Some people devote their entire lives to that, and their level of understanding, ability and skill with the word of God might exceed somebody else’s. But I believe that the Bible is a very practical book and that anybody can understand its teachings for our everyday lives. I want to give you five basic guidelines for understanding what the scriptures are telling us. If you will heed these things, you’ll come a lot closer to truly understanding what the Bible writers meant when they wrote what they did.

By the way, it is not that the Bible was written in confusing and convoluted terms; it’s merely the fact that we live 2,000 years after it was penned. We live in a different culture. There is a language barrier. We have to overcome those hurdles and transport ourselves, as it were, back to that time to understand what those words, which were actually very common and practical to those people then, meant to them and thus, in translation, what they mean to us.

First of all, to rightly divide the word of God, it is vitally important that the Bible reader understand the division of the Old and New Testaments. That division exists in the scriptures for good reason. It’s not only a chronological line that essentially divides the history of man into the time before Christ and the time when Jesus came and afterwards. You’re likely already familiar with that fact. But, unfortunately, that fact is lost when some people begin to actually interpret the teachings of the Bible.

The Old Testament is the portion of scripture that catalogs the early history of man, and the development of God’s scheme or plan for mankind and his redemption. The Old Testament sets the stage if you please, for all that came to pass when Christ ultimately came and established the new covenant. The Old Testament shows us how man sinned beginning with Adam; how mankind became lost and condemned in the eyes of a holy and righteous God. It also reveals God’s promise to redeem man from his sin.

From the time of Abraham on, we see where God began to develop a nation, through whom He would work to bring His plan to pass. That nation was Israel and they were a special and a chosen people to God, and God worked through them in order to bring the Messiah into this world and bring His plan to pass. In order to keep it that way, God gave unto His people back then a law. He gave them the Ten Commandments in the wilderness, and that law was to be a moral code for them to live their lives by.

Moses also revealed God's ceremonial law, which governed Israel's daily life and religious practice, the specifics of their religion. It established the Levitical priesthood, it refined the sacrificial system of limited atonement, as we call it. One of the results of that law was to put a wall or fence around the nation of Israel and to keep them separate from every other nation on the earth. God made a promise to Abraham, and thus to the Jews, to bring the Messiah into this world through Abraham's lineage. The law separated them from all other nations, thus keeping the bloodline of Abraham pure by keeping His peoples separate from the other people of the earth. All of this was so that the promise might be fulfilled.

The law also pointed forward to the need of a savior to come into the world and redeem man from the sin he found himself in. How did it do that? Well, that cumbersome law only reinforced the fact that man could not be saved by his own strength. God had to step in--in His grace and mercy--and provide what man could not provide for his redemption.

Galatians 3:19 "Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made..."

In other words, Paul is arguing in this passage that since the law and the law's authority over God's people is now a thing of the past, what good is the law? Why do we have the law? Why read and study the law? The law was given, he says, until the seed of Abraham would come into this world and establish a NEW covenant. The word "*till*" indicates that something would be the case only *until* a certain point in time. That's a very basic and common word. If I say I'm going to preach *until* 7:00 that means that by 7:01 I will have stopped preaching. It marks a point of cessation. In the same way, the scripture tells us that the law was given (and remember, it was given to the Jews, not Gentiles) *until* Christ came into the world and fulfilled it. That law was given to point forward to Christ. Once Christ came, we no longer need a law to point forward to Him. Now, the New Testament *reveals* Him. Once Christ came, He fulfilled the purpose of that Mosaic economy and that law was taken out of the way.

Now, a lot of folks disagree with that, but that is what the Bible plainly declares.

Galatians 3:23-25 "But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster."

"Before faith came" is talking about *before the system of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, before the gospel came, before Christ came and died*, and so forth. Paul is simply saying that the law was only intended to be a temporary system or arrangement until the time was ready for Christ to come into this world and accomplish the redemption of mankind. Once that took place, we would no longer be under that law.

Colossians 2:14 "Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross."

So, when Jesus died, He fulfilled the Old Testament law and He “*took it out of the way,*” and in its place, He established a new and a better law, a better covenant. Yet, men try to go back to that old law today. At least, they do when they want to. Nobody is trying to perform the animal sacrifices of that system. People don’t keep all of the feasts and observances of that law today, except for the ones they choose. But that’s not how it works in reference to that very law.

Galatians 5:3 “For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law.”

Paul is telling them that if they were going to keep part of it then they needed to keep all of it. That would certainly include all of its sacrifices and ceremonies. Well, people aren’t doing that. You can’t simply go back and pick the things that you want to bring forward into the church out of that old economy. Some people try to justify instrumental music in Christian worship, not because there’s a New Testament passage that teaches it, but they will cite instances where it was used back under the law. Well, that won’t work. If you want to find Bible authority for a practice in this day and age, you will find it in the New Testament. And if you’re going to sanction one thing out of the Old Testament, then sanction the burning of incense and the sacrifice of animals and the priesthood and all of the other things that belong under that economy.

Someone may say, well, what is the Old Testament for then? Why even have it in our Bibles? Why should I bother to read the Old Testament? Oh, you need to read the Old Testament. You need to come to understand it and its general message and timeline. According to Paul, every Bible student needs a good knowledge of what happened before Christ came.

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.”

Paul says to New Testament Christians that the things written back in the Old Testament dispensation to the Jews were written even for *our learning*—even we Gentiles—and we DO learn from the Old Testament. In fact, it would be nearly impossible to understand the meaning and importance of the New Testament without some understanding of the Old Testament. Try reading and understanding the book of Hebrews without knowing something about the tabernacle and the Old Testament priesthood, with its sacrifices and ceremonies. Why, it would all make no sense whatsoever.

You see, the New Testament is simply the Old Testament revealed; the Old Testament was the New Testament concealed, as has been said. The Old Testament was a figure or a symbol or shadow of what would come to pass in Christ Jesus our Lord. That law has been taken out of the way, and thank God for it. Now, if we fail to understand that, we’re going to misunderstand the Bible, and we’ll make some grave and terrible mistakes of interpretation in the process. So, learn about the difference between the two major divisions of the Bible.

Second of all, if I want to understand what I read in the scriptures, I need to learn to keep what I read in its proper context. Context. We all know the danger of hearing or repeating something out of context. You can have a completely innocent statement that can be turned into something vile or malicious if it’s

ripped from the context of the entire speech or conversation. Many times, politicians are misunderstood because the media takes a little sound bite out of a 10, 15, or 20-minute speech and they play 8 or 12 seconds of it. If that properly represents what the politician was saying, that's right, and a good journalist strives to fairly represent what the subject was saying. But, if the journalist isn't careful and he removes it from the context in which it was said, he can give it an entirely different meaning. You know, we don't generally like it when someone quotes us out of context because it misrepresents what we intended to say.

It's no less of an injustice when we do that to the word of God. Instead of letting the Bible interpret the Bible, if we just simply pull a statement out of its surrounding context in God's word, we'll make it say something entirely different than what the Holy Spirit was conveying. A beginning Bible student will naturally puzzle over a passage of scripture, until he learns to back up and read the surrounding chapter, or even the chapter before, or the entire book or epistle that contains that verse. And then and only then does it become clear what the writer was saying.

Many, many verses are twisted and abused by careless preachers simply because they do not recognize the context of the verse. Time would fail me today to even begin to enumerate the false doctrines and notions that are built upon scriptures that are totally taken away from the context in which they were written. Entire systems of false doctrines and denominations are built on taking a verse of scripture away from its context. Don't forget this: a verse without context becomes a pretext, and that's very dangerous. Let me give you a plain example of that. Let's look at a portion of Mark's account of the great commission.

Mark 16:17-18 "And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover."

Now, if I just open my Bible and read those two verses with no surrounding context, what would I immediately assume? Wouldn't I easily come to the conclusion that Jesus was saying that every single person who ever came to believe in Jesus Christ and became a Christian would be given the power to work miracles? But is that what He was saying? Are there people who believe in Jesus and are Christians who don't have the power to drink poison and it not kill them? Or who can pick up deadly serpents and not be harmed by them? Or speak in tongues, heal the sick, or cast out devils? Just about anybody will acknowledge that in their own view of what a Christian is, there are Christians who don't have those abilities. Well, if that's the case and if that's what Jesus was saying, then the word of God is not true.

But you see, when we look at the context, a whole new meaning emerges. What IS the Lord saying? We can see what the Lord is talking about by backing up and seeing who He is speaking to and under what circumstances. This conversation was at the close of Jesus' earthly stay, and He had spent the last three years preparing His disciples for not only the events surrounding His death, but ultimately the events that would follow: His ascension back up to heaven, the establishment of His church upon this earth. This little band of disciples would be the beginning of His great kingdom on this earth. It would be up to

them to tell everyone in the world about Jesus and the salvation that He brought to earth, to publish the gospel for the world of all ages.

Well, that was a pretty tall order for this little handful of unlearned, inarticulate, ignorant men, as the disciples were at this point. In fact, they had already shown their own weakness by failing to understand exactly what had happened when Jesus was crucified. They were under some very false illusions about the Lord and about His kingdom. It wasn't that they didn't necessarily believe that He was the Son of God; they just didn't understand it. And their faith at times grew very weak and they were very perplexed by all of the events that had come to pass there in Jerusalem.

But you see, Jesus was going to use them to turn the world upside down by the testimony of His death, burial and resurrection. How would He do that? How could these men ever be capable of taking on such a monumental mission? How could it ever be left up to them to accurately document the testimony, message and mission of the Lord Jesus? Well, the Lord promises them some help. And that's what this meeting with His disciples before His ascension back to heaven is all about. He commissioned them to go and testify to every person on earth what they had seen, that Jesus was risen from the dead, and that by believing in Him and being baptized, they could be saved.

Now, if we listen to the entire conversation, we can see who Jesus meant when He said they would have all of these powers and why. Let's pick up the reading in verse 9.

Mark 16:9-14 "Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils. And she went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept. And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not. After that he appeared in another form unto two of them, as they walked, and went into the country. And they went and told it unto the residue: neither believed they them. Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen."

You see, there is where the unbelief was. Therefore, Jesus gives them the great commission.

Mark 16:15 "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."

Well, how would they do that? Jesus says that if they would just believe the message that He was giving them to preach, He would help them. He would empower them. They would have gifts to let them take that message to the world. He's talking about the apostles—not believers in general. So, keeping that passage in context helps us to understand the word of God.