

“RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH”

THERE is no subject which can rank with this as of equal importance, if we are to have a right understanding, or even to approach a right understanding of the Word of God.

This blessed Word comes before us with various titles, and each title which God has given it brings with it its own corresponding responsibility to our hearts. If it is called “the engrafted Word”, as it is in Jas. i. 21, we are to receive it. “Receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.” That comes first.

Then it is called in Titus i. 9, “the faithful Word”, and as the faithful Word, it is our duty and our privilege too, to hold it fast—“holding fast the faithful word”. Just because it is faithful we can hold it fast for our soul’s peace and our heart’s comfort and strength.

Then in Phil. ii. 16, it is called “the Word of life”. What is our duty to it as the word of life, the life-giving word? Our duty is to hold it forth; “holding forth the Word of life”, so that others may receive that life which it reveals, and that new life, eternal life, spiritual life, which it imparts.

But then it is called in 2 Tim. ii. 15, “the Word of truth”; and with regard to the Word of truth our duty is to rightly divide it. You see how these responsibilities are divinely perfect. We are not told to rightly divide “the faithful word”. We have to hold it fast. That is all. And we are not told to hold fast the “Word of life”. We are told to hold it forth that others may enjoy that life which it brought to us. And that which concerns us as to the “Word of truth” is the right division of it. This division refers, not merely to its inward truth, but it embraces even its outward form. Man always thinks he can improve upon what God has done. He has always got a better way. Whatever God may say, or whatever He may do, man’s thoughts and man’s ways are always the opposite of God’s. Man will always attempt improvements, but his improvements always end in his own disaster.

God has given us a way of righteousness, but man has invented a way of his own, and those two ways are brought

before us upon the very fore-front of Revelation, the way of God and the way of man—the one which Abel took and the other which Cain invented. These are the only two ways from that moment to this.

God has given us a “blessed hope” in His Word. “That blessed hope” is not enough for man. He thinks he can improve upon that. So he has got a “larger hope”. God’s hope is not large enough for him. And so, whatever department you may take (even as to God’s way of holiness), whatever line you may pursue, man thinks he can improve upon it, and he always tries to.

Now, as to the outward form of the Word, man has attempted to improve upon God’s order and arrangement. The ancient division, the right division, of the Word of God has come down to us from the earliest times, and it has been endorsed by the testimony of the Lord Jesus Himself, as consisting of three great divisions—“the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms.” That does not do for man. Man arranges them differently! He has made four divisions. He retains the Law—i.e. the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch—(though he is now trying to make six books instead of five, and call it the “Hexateuch”), and he retains the Prophets, but he has made two new divisions. He has put the historical books together, and what he calls the Poetical books!

And then, with regard to the books themselves, they have come down to us in a Divine order and a Divine number. They have come down to us in twenty-four books. But man has made them into thirty-nine. I speak of the Old Testament, of course, now. Twenty-four books did not do for man, so he divides some of them up and makes them into thirty-nine. And then as to the division of the books themselves. They come down to us already divided, and may we not say, rightly divided, for those divisions form part of the text itself. What comes to us was written almost by the finger of God, written by the agency of men, the Holy Ghost using human instruments; and the division comes to us with the same authority as the words which are divided.

Those divisions are of two kinds. They are called Open sections and Closed sections, and correspond to our larger and smaller paragraphs. These come to us with the text, and as part of the text itself, and I know of no authority which gives

me the right to take the one and leave the other. I know of no authority which can authorize me to take the words and reject the form in which the words come to us. And then there is a further division, for the Verses are as ancient as any other part of it. I mean the verses of the Hebrew. They do not correspond to man's verses altogether. Man has got his own verses, of course. He made them about the middle of the thirteenth century, and at about the same time he invented some other divisions which are called chapters, but these are all entirely human, entirely Gentile.

Then there are other divisions which are more human in their origin, but still ancient and Jewish. These correspond with our ecclesiastical Lessons: The Parashyoth and Sedarim answering to our first Lesson, and the Haphtaroth to our second Lesson. The Parashyoth are peculiar to the Pentateuch alone, peculiar to the Law. There are 54 of these divisions in the five books of the law. The name given to them and written in most of the manuscripts "Parashyoth" is from "parash", to divide. Of these 54 divisions there are 12 in Genesis, 11 in Exodus, 10 in Numbers, 10 in Leviticus, and 11 in Deuteronomy.

And then you have another kind of division running through the whole of the Old Testament. It is further divided into shorter Lessons, and these are called "Sedarim", from the verb "sadar", to arrange in order. This is the way in which the Old Testament is arranged with a view to its being read through in three years; while the other division, or the Parashyoth, is a division of the Law for its being read through in one year. So you see that the idea of our Bible-reading unions that divides up the whole Bible into certain portions for every day is no new or modern idea, though it is very different, of course, from these ancient and authoritative divisions which we have here. There are 452 of these smaller divisions called Sedarim (167 in the Law, 204 in the Prophets, and 81 in the other books which are called by the name of the Psalms). The Lord Jesus calls them the Psalms, and they are so called because the Psalms form the first great book in that division.

You see, therefore, what we lose and suffer to-day from wrongly dividing the word of truth, even as to its outward form. We all suffer from man's attempt at improvement in thus wrongly dividing this precious "Word of truth". All the divisions of the manuscripts and of the printed Hebrew text

faithfully followed the divisions which have thus come down to us, and it was not until the year 1517 that the Jews first adopted the Gentile or so-called "Christian" chapters, and disfigured the Hebrew Bible by the pernicious practice which has been adopted in all subsequent editions. The Complutensian Polyglot was the first to notice the chapters, but then only in the margin; and the next great edition of the Hebrew Bible, by Felix Pratensis, marked them in the margin only. He still kept the text in its integrity. It was left for Arias Montanus, who, in 1517, in a Bible printed in Antwerp, was the first to actually break up the Hebrew text and to make it conform to the order and to the divisions which man had imposed upon it. This was the work of Gentiles, and was certainly not "rightly dividing the Word of truth", with which men were dealing.

But however important the right division of the outward form of the word may be, the right division of the inward truth is of infinitely greater importance. Just because it is "the Word of TRUTH" it is important, and I believe that just in proportion as we rightly divide it, in that proportion shall we arrive at the "truth". If we, as students of this Word, differ in our apprehensions of the truth of God, it arises from the fact that we do not divide it in the same manner—that not one of us divides it altogether rightly. It is only in that measure in which we divide it rightly that we can approach the truth. It is "the Word of TRUTH": it is the fountain of "truth". It not only contains the truth, but it is the truth itself—not merely "the Word" as a whole, but "the words" which go to make it up. We have the authority of the Holy Ghost for this in Jeremiah xv. 16, where Jeremiah says by the Spirit, "Thy WORDS were found, and I did eat them, and Thy WORD was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart". And so with our blessed Lord Himself. You remember in John xvii, the closing words of His earthly ministry, the words in which he delivered up His office of Prophet, when he had finished His work, there was the same three-fold reference to the Word of truth that you have in the opening of His ministry; for His first ministerial words, the first words of His office as Prophet, were these: "It is written . . . it is written . . . it is written"—three times repeated. And in His last words, in which He gave up His office of Prophet, and could say, "I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do," He says, in the 17th verse (John xvii), "Thy word is

truth"; and in the 14th verse, "I have given unto them Thy word"; and in the 8th verse, "I have given unto them the words which Thou gavest Me". So I say we not only have to deal with the Word as a whole, but with the words which make up that Word, and therefore we see the wonderful importance of "rightly dividing" it.

This precept is especially addressed to God's workmen. In verse 15 of this chapter (2 Tim. ii.) we have God's "workman", and these are the instructions given to God's workman. The "workman" of verse 15 corresponds in the structure of the passage with Jehovah's "servant" at the end of the chapter. God's workman has his instructions, and the Lord's servant has his instructions also. He is not to strive with words with those who oppose themselves. Those who oppose themselves need instruction, and so it says, "In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves." If they knew a little more they would not oppose. And, therefore, the Lord's servant has to be encouraged in instructing those who oppose themselves. But God's "workman" is to be guided by the great principle of "rightly dividing the Word of truth". In consequence of this and in immediate connection with it in the context, you have those "who, concerning the truth, have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already"; so that they did not divide the truth rightly, you see, with regard to the doctrine of the resurrection.

This word is addressed to God's "workman" for two reasons; first, that he may be approved unto God, "Study to show thyself approved unto God", to please God; and, secondly, that he may attain to the truth. Therefore it follows that, if we do not divide it rightly, we can neither find the truth, neither can we please God as His workmen. Hence you will perceive the wonderful importance of this great and blessed subject.

This phrase "rightly dividing", occurs nowhere else in the whole of the New Testament, and only twice in the Greek of the Old Testament. As it occurs only twice, you may as well have the passages, because they will throw light upon the meaning of the word. The first is in Psalm cxix. 128, where you see the inner force and meaning of it. "Therefore I esteem all Thy precepts concerning all things to be right", i.e. "I esteem as right all Thy precepts concerning all things", which means I rightly divide off Jehovah's precepts from the precepts of man. The precepts of man may or may not be right. Jehovah's

precepts, therefore, must be rightly divided and separated off from all other precepts, and then they are divided rightly.

Again, in Proverbs iii. 6, "In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct" (the word is thus translated here), i.e. "He shall rightly divide thy ways". They will only be rightly divided, and they will only be right, and they will only be pleasing to Him, when they are thus rightly divided off from all other ways.

So I repeat that we have here more than a hint that, if we do not rightly divide the word, we shall not find the truth; neither shall we please God in our dealings with that truth; and certainly we shall not be "approved" unto Him as workmen, but on the contrary we shall be very much ashamed of ourselves. It says, "a workman that needeth not to be ashamed"; and if we do not rightly divide the word, we shall have great reason to be ashamed.

Now when we come to add the New Testament to the Old, we perceive other phenomena with regard to the right division of it. The moment you put the New Testament, as we call it, to the Old, you have these two great divisions. But we have no business with the word "Testament", either as the "Old Testament" or the "New Testament". Testament is a Latin word and has no connection whatever with the word "Covenant". When you put the two so-called "Covenants" together we have the whole Bible—the whole Word of God; and when we look at it as a whole, we notice that all through there is one great subject running from the beginning to the end, and that is the coming of the Coming One. From Gen. iii. 15, the coming of "the seed of the woman" is the one great subject which develops into the promise and prophecy of the coming King and His Kingdom. Then in the Gospels we have not so much the beginning of the New, but we have the completion of the Old Testament. We have the fulfilment of the Old Testament promise and prophecy, the story of the coming of the King, and the proclamation of the kingdom. We have, alas! something more—we have the rejection of both. This is the sum and substance of the historical records of the four Gospels!

And then passing on and over to the Apocalypse, you have the same King and the same kingdom set up and established with Divine power and judgment, and the fulfilment, too, of all those Old Testament prophecies concerning the King and the

kingdom. But this division, if it is a right one, leaves a large portion of the New Testament unaccounted for. Hence we have the Epistles coming in between the rejection of the King and the establishment of the kingdom; and filling up a great gap, a great parenthesis between the rejection of the kingdom and the establishment of the kingdom in Divine judgment and power. Further, we have in the Acts of the Apostles, the transitional history between the rejection of the King in the Gospels and the establishment of the Church of God among the Gentiles.

It is customary with most readers of the Scriptures, and the very great majority of Christians, to take all the Bible as referring to all time and to all persons. They make no division whatsoever! The result must, of course, be error and confusion, and it cannot be truth. How important, for example, it is that we should divide it rightly according to the three great subjects of the word which concern one or other of three great divisions of mankind. What God hath separated and divided we must not join together, any more than we may separate what God has joined together. You have that which concerns "the Jew", that which concerns "the Gentile", and that which concerns "the Church of God" (1 Cor. x. 32). Now, if we read the one into the other, and take that which is addressed to the one as though it was addressed to the other, the result must be confusion, because we are not rightly dividing the great subject matter of the Word. And then, again, unless in our reading we distinguish between the two covenants, the covenant of Mount Sinai and the covenant of Mount Sion, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, there must be confusion. If, in our reading or hearing read publicly such Scriptures as the Book of Deuteronomy or the Prophet Ezekiel we interpret them of ourselves, and do not rightly divide them, we put ourselves immediately under the covenant of works. We lose sight of our standing in Christ; we lose sight of our standing in grace, and of all that grace has done for us, and all that grace has given us; and then we get into confusion as to the truth and into distress as to our peace.

Hence we have to distinguish between the Scriptures even of the New Testament, those that speak of our "standing", and those that refer to our "state"; those that refer to the position that God has given us in Christ, and those which relate to our walk before men in this world. If we mix them together, or if

we read the one into the other, there is confusion, there is error, and there is not truth; and we suffer because we do not rightly divide the Word. Still more important is the error that arises from not rightly dividing the Word as to its dispensations—as to its times and seasons. Of course this refers only to interpretation, not to application. Truth is eternal; it is written from the beginning, for example, “I will never leave thee nor forsake thee”; that is eternally true of God to all His people, and, therefore, though that promise refers, by interpretation, to the person or persons to whom it was said at the time, there is an eternal application of it to the very end of time for all who have the Lord for their God; but all application of God’s Word must be governed by the analogy of truth, and we must not take a portion that refers to one people, spoken at one time, and interpret it as though it referred equally to another people at another time.

Take, for instance, the Sermon on the Mount. What great confusion is caused among Christians, and especially among infidels, who are never tired of bringing before us the Sermon on the Mount. You see, they do not know anything about rightly dividing the Word. The so-called “Sermon on the Mount” was spoken during that part of the ministry of the Lord which was occupied with the proclamation of the kingdom. But the King and the Kingdom were rejected, and, therefore, those precepts are in abeyance. Precepts must always be interpreted with reference to the occasion when, and the persons to whom, they were given; and they may be applied to other occasions and persons only so far as may be consistent and in harmony with them. For example, other precepts given by our Lord during His ministry were abrogated even before the close of it! He told His Apostles when they proclaimed the kingdom (Matt. x. 7–10), “Provide neither gold, nor silver, nor brass in your purses; nor scrip for your journey; neither two coats, nor yet staves”; but after the kingdom had been finally rejected and the King was about to be crucified, He said (Luke xxii. 36), “But Now, he that hath a purse let him take it, and likewise his scrip; and he that hath no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one”. This proves beyond all controversy that those precepts given in the Sermon on the Mount refer to the period during which the kingdom was being proclaimed, and will apply again only when the time shall come to preach “the Gospel of the

Kingdom” (Matt. xxiv. 14). Meantime they are in abeyance, while the kingdom itself is in abeyance. When the kingdom is on the point of being set up, what does it matter to the proclaimers of it whether they have two coats or one, purse or no purse, scrip or no scrip? All will be theirs directly the King is enthroned.

Our lot is cast during the days when the kingdom is rejected, and therefore the precepts which refer to the period of its proclamation must not be interpreted of ourselves. We have our special precepts as members of “the Church of God”, given us by the same Lord and Christ after He had ascended up into glory in the Pauline Epistles and addressed to the Churches. We, therefore, who have our standing in Christ, have nothing to do with that Sermon on the Mount, by way of interpretation. All the truth and all the Divine principles which are in it we can apply, of course, to ourselves, but all the special precepts are in abeyance until the kingdom shall be again proclaimed. So that if we are to obey the words of Christ, we are directed to hear, not those words in the Sermon on the Mount (which are now postponed), but the words which the Spirit has specially addressed to the Churches in the Epistles especially sent and written for their instruction and guidance.

And so with other passages: with Matt. xxiv., for example, which refers to the great Tribulation. If we read that into the present dispensation, and take what is said there as being for our guidance, there will be only confusion and error. We must not read a subsequent revelation into a previous revelation which is perfectly complete without it, which can be perfectly well understood, and which was perfectly well understood by those to whom it was addressed. And if we do read a subsequent revelation into a previous one, we only introduce both confusion and error.

And now, of course, time fails to illustrate the way in which this important principle may be applied to such a subject, for example, as the Resurrection; rightly dividing what is said concerning the resurrection of “Christ, the firstfruits, afterwards they that are Christ’s at His coming, and then the end”; utterly doing away with the modern and erroneous idea of a so-called “general resurrection”, which assumes that all who have died will rise at one and the same time.

Rightly dividing also what it says with regard to the JUDG-

MENTS in 2 Cor. v., in Matt. xxv., and in Rev. xx., which each takes place under different circumstances, and at different times; and with regard to different persons, with different rewards and awards. You can see how far-reaching and how important is the great principle involved in "rightly dividing the Word of truth".

And it is a dividing word, dear friends, as well as a word to be divided. It is a word which divides us. We have not only to rightly divide the Word, but this Word rightly divides us. It pierces even to the dividing asunder of joints and marrow. It divides us in ourselves; it divides us collectively amongst one another. That is true of us to-day, as it was true in the days when our Lord was upon earth. It says "There was a division among the people because of Him". There is a division now, too, "because of HIM", and there will be another division for which we are waiting and for which we are looking, when all those who are His will be caught up to meet Him in the air, so to be for ever with the Lord.