

2 Timothy 2:15

Pastor: 2 Timothy 2:15: The Word of God is to be rightly divided between the Old and New Testaments, Israel and the Church.

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.”

One of the most important verses to people of faith is undeniably 2 Timothy 2:15, as it has encouraged people throughout history to further study and refine their understanding of the Holy Bible: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (ESV).¹ Yet it might be interesting to note how a few interpreters are not quite sure as to what *ton logon tēs alētheias* (τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας) is. What is “the word of truth”? The Holy Scriptures? The good news of salvation? Or, how both the gospel message and the Scriptures work together? The later theme of 2 Timothy 3:15-16 surely builds upon this, exclaiming how “all Scripture” must be employed for upstanding living and appropriate doctrine. Psalm 119:43 describes how the *devar-emet* (דְּבַר־אֱמֶת) involves a diligent obedience to God’s commandments: “And do not take the word of truth [*devar-emet*] utterly out of my mouth, for I wait for Your ordinances.”

Those who handle the Holy Scriptures and the message of redemption, which here would largely pertain to how Messiah followers approach the Tanach or Old Testament, are to be faithful workers. An *ergatēs* (ἐργάτης) is “a workman: esp. one who works the soil, a husbandman,” also regarding “one who practises an art” (LS).² We might consider the previous emphasis in v. 6 of the farmer, who has to diligently work in order to receive a crop. As it regards the position of teachers, James 3:1 issues the plain warning, “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.” While all Believers are to study the Scriptures and be mature enough to reasonably understand and apply them to their lives, the worker who must teach and expound upon the Scriptures to other people—must commit a great deal of time, study, patience, and perseverance to do so properly. There is also a large degree of self-sacrifice involved.

2 Timothy 2:15 is often one of the most favorite verses for those who hold to a dispensational view of God’s elect, where He has two groups of chosen ones: Israel and “the Church.” As appears in the KJV, 2 Timothy 2:15 is rendered as, “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, **rightly dividing** the word of truth.” The contention supported by dispensationalist C.R. Stam is that “all of the Bible is *for* us, but it is not addressed to us or written about us,”³ which for him is different than remembering the original ancient audiences to whom the Scriptures were delivered. He advocates that only parts of the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) clearly directed at non-Jews by the Apostle Paul are relevant to be followed today. In order to “rightly divide” the Scriptures, the thought is that one has to literally split up the Bible between books and passages which are believed to be directed to the Jewish people, and others toward the largely non-Jewish “Church.” What this basically does is that it keeps many Christians away from reading and applying the Tanach or Old Testament to their lives. Those who rely a little too heavily on the (antiquated) King James Version (and also to an extent, the NKJV) can come to some inappropriate conclusions regarding “rightly dividing” the Word.

To split up the Bible among so-called groups of elect would be tantamount to arguing that God not only has a double standard, but He is divided with how He will judge humanity. Thankfully, this is not the character of God as presented to us in Scripture. The Lord told Ancient Israel in Deuteronomy 25:13, “You shall not have in your bag differing weights, a large and a small” (cf. Leviticus 19:36). He prohibited Ancient Israel from having differing weights and measures, or different standards Proverbs 20:10 states quite candidly, “Differing

¹ This entry has been adapted from the commentary *The Pastoral Epistles for the Practical Messianic*.

² LS, 311.

³ C.R. Stam, *Things That Differ* (Stevens Point, WI: Worzalla Publishing, Co., 1951), 20.

weights and differing measures, both of them are abominable to the LORD.” Have these basic premises changed?

The actual Greek verb rendered as “rightly dividing” in the KJV is *orthotomeō* (ὀρθοτομέω), literally meaning “to cut in a straight line” (LS).⁴ It may also be defined as “to teach it aright” (LS)⁵ or “**guide the word of truth along a straight path**” (BDAG).⁶ In Proverbs 3:6 in the Septuagint, the Hebrew verb *yashar* (יָשַׁר), appearing in the Piel stem (intensive action, active voice), “make smooth, straight” (BDB),⁷ is translated as *orthotomeō*: “In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight [*yashar*; LXX: *orthotomeō*].” Another important usage is Proverbs 11:5: “The righteousness of the blameless will smooth [*yashar*; LXX: *orthotomeō*] his way, but the wicked will fall by his own wickedness.” I. Howard Marshall & Philip H. Towner describe what is witnessed as “the metaphorical concept of a straight road which is opened up by God and along which people should travel”⁸ (cf. 1 Samuel 12:23; Psalm 107:7; Proverbs 20:11; Jeremiah 31:1; Proverbs 16:25).

In a classical context, one witnesses the related adverb *orthōs* (ὀρθῶς), “**pert. to acting in conformity with a norm or standard**” (BDAG),⁹ employed in the works of Plato. In his *Laws* 810E, the Athenian observes, “Over and over gain it’s claimed that in order to educate young people properly [*orthōs paideuomenous tōn neōn*, ὀρθῶς παιδευομένων τῶν νέων]¹⁰ we have to cram their heads full of this stuff,”¹¹ referring to various Greek poets, authors, and comedians.

Recognizing how *orthotomeō* appears in a variety of ancient witnesses, it is not surprising why this verb is commonly rendered with something along the lines of: “rightly handling” (RSV), “accurately handling” (NASU), “correctly handles” (NIV), or even “keep strictly” (REB). If there is anything regarding a sort of “cutting” involved, when one approaches the Holy Scriptures and the proclamation of the gospel therein, it would be in comparison to various ancient professions or engineering jobs that involved skill, precision, and careful accuracy. A. Duane Litfin indicates, “Stone masons, plowers, road builders, tentmakers, and...surgeons have been suggested, but a firm conclusion remains elusive. What is clear is that the shame of God’s disapproval awaits those who mishandle His Word.”¹² Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 2:17 can be considered here: “For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Messiah in the sight of God.”

Most exegetes on 2 Timothy 2:15 do not at all think that splitting or dividing up the Bible among so-called groups of elect is what is in view, but rather a correct and proper usage of the Scriptures and/or the gospel is what is described.¹³ This includes a widely known dispensationalist like Charles C. Ryrie, who in his *Ryrie Study Bible* (KJV) notes, comments that “*rightly dividing*” means, “correctly handling the Word of God, in both analysis and presentation—in contrast to the inane interpretations of the false teachers.”¹⁴ The idea of splitting up the Bible between Israel and “the Church,” as though different books of the Bible should be quantitatively ignored by various people, is an interpretation with rather poor support.¹⁵ One is literally tempted to say that “dividing” the Word as examining the Bible via a cut-and-paste method is a real cockamamie idea. And as today’s Messianics widely know, and many evangelical Christians are definitely and thankfully becoming more aware, **ignoring God’s Instruction in the Torah and Tanach** (the Old Testament) **has not helped the contemporary Body of Messiah at all!**

⁴ LS, 567.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ BDAG, 722.

⁷ BDB, 448.

⁸ Marshall & Towner, 748.

⁹ BDAG, 722.

¹⁰ The Greek source text for these works has been accessed via the Perseus Collection <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>>.

¹¹ Plato, *Laws*, 256.

¹² Litfin, in *BKCNT*, 754.

¹³ Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 160; Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 255; Knight, pp 411-412; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, pp 524-525; Towner, pp 521-522.

¹⁴ Charles C. Ryrie, ed., *The Ryrie Study Bible*, KJV (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), 1719.

¹⁵ For further review, do consult the author’s article “When Did ‘the Church’ Begin?” (appearing in *Introduction to Things Messianic*).

Rather than argue from a vantage point of Timothy teaching from the Scriptures, Marshall & Towner instead claim, “The point is not teaching but rather Timothy’s own conduct which is to be in accord with the gospel. Hence the phrase means ‘to do what is right with reference to the word of truth’ and has to do with way of life rather than teaching.”¹⁶ This perspective is not at all invalid, because it would serve to support how Timothy’s life example and testimony of faith would stand in stark contrast to any of the false teachers or opponents he faced in Ephesus. Noting the interpretation of *orthotomeō* regarding personal behavior, rather than accurate teaching, William D. Mounce observes, “Perhaps the rarity of ὀρθοτομεῖν [*orthotomein*] should serve as a caution against making too precise a distinction between the two options, especially in light of the theme in the PE that right belief and right conduct go hand in hand.”¹⁷ It should go without saying that a proper demeanor and attitude must accompany a proper reading and teaching upon the Holy Scriptures.

A considerable duty for any good Bible teacher is being able to expound upon the essential truths of the gospel from the Tanach Scriptures, demonstrating how the Tanach molded the worldview and mission of Yeshua and His Apostles, *and* how they lived out its holy and righteous imperatives in their ministry activities. A definite way of applying 2 Timothy 2:15, in terms of properly handling the Tanach Scriptures, is remembering the missional theme of Luke 3:4, which reaffirms Isaiah 40:3, “as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, ‘MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.’”¹⁸ Also highly important to remember would be the words of the Apostle Peter:

“As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that *would come* to you made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Messiah within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Messiah and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look” (1 Peter 1:10-12).

Indeed, expounding upon the arrival of Yeshua and the great atonement He has provided for sinful humanity, **is what should guide much of our Tanach examination.** We might not be able to find Messianic “prophecies,” per se, in every single verse of the Tanach, but we can certainly find foundational stories and accounts that help us to better understand and appreciate Yeshua’s teachings and ministry.

Reflecting on 2 Timothy 2:15, Witherington details, “Probably what is meant here is not ‘rightly dividing the Scriptures,’ but rather cutting straight to the point in one’s preaching, proclaiming the straight stuff, not beating around the bush with esoterica.”¹⁸ Esoteric or ethereal speculations are what the false teachers in Ephesus would widely have been pushing, whereas Timothy was to have a clear message rooted in the Scriptures, living forth a transformed life in Messiah. Gary W. Demarest further states how “To ‘cut straight’ in this sense is to be as direct as possible in getting to the destination.”¹⁹ While most appropriate, he goes on to apply this in a way that can have some rather negative consequences in modern day settings:

“I plead with my students in the seminary classroom not to take their lecture notes into the pulpit. The task of the local preacher or teacher...is to be a broker between the professional theologian and the person in the congregation.”²⁰

When I was in seminary (2005-2008) I too was taught something like this. *Don’t preach term paper sermons. Don’t even mention Hebrew or Greek, just the “original language.”* If there is anything I disagreed about in the strongest from anything I heard from various professors, these sentences would top my list. It is absolutely true that a person who preaches from God’s Word before a general assembly, should not bore people with how many theologians or scholars believe this or that, or the specificity of many verb tenses or definite articles where it would clearly be too much information. Yet it is also quite true that too much of today’s popular preaching is not that engaged with contemporary Bible scholarship, and will use vague

¹⁶ Marshall & Towner, 749.

¹⁷ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 525.

¹⁸ Witherington, *Titus, 1-2 Timothy and 1-3 John*, 336.

¹⁹ Demarest, 260.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

references like “the Hebrew” or “the Greek” with no specification. When various Believers feel that their local pastor is not feeding them enough—because he will not give people even an essay-level sermon—then many will turn to things like the Internet, Wikipedia, and an entire array of freely-hosted websites and blogs, and with them most frequently a huge amount of misinformation from people who are not a part of the conversation in Biblical Studies.

Today’s spiritual leaders and teachers should not make their sermons or weekly messages too simplistic, so that people are not challenged to grow in the Lord and study the Bible themselves. While a weekly message within a congregational service need not be overly-detailed, a regularly held Bible study should be able to dissect many of the finer details of the Word. This does mean, especially for our emerging Messianic movement, that you need to have a spiritual leader or teacher who has a working knowledge of the Biblical languages, and stays somewhat up to date with trends in contemporary Jewish and Christian theology from the last few decades. To not have such things, and leave the general assembly of one’s congregation to look elsewhere—meaning, most likely in *the wrong place*—for instruction, is something to surely be remedied. To not desire fixing it, would be a crime against the *ekklēsia*.