

Dispensationalism

'Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth' - What Does It Mean?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

This is part three of a series on Dispensationalism. Read [part two](#).

It does not mean, as one Dispensationalist spokesman puts it, dissecting God's Word like a human cadaver.

In the first two articles of this series, we examined Dispensationalism's definition of a dispensation from two standpoints. One is the [test of application](#), and the other is the [test of agreement with Scripture](#). We saw that the definition of a dispensation as "a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God" fails both tests.

Let me say a further word about the test of agreement with Scripture before we move on. I am not suggesting that we cannot legitimately employ theological terms that are not contained in Scripture. If that were true we could never speak of the Trinity, the Rapture, or a Covenant of Redemption among the persons of the Godhead. But all are clearly taught in the Word. But I am saying that when we employ a term, such as dispensation, that *is* explicitly used in the pages of the Word of God, we must define it as Scripture defines it. We cannot arbitrarily redefine it to suit a man-made system or agenda.¹

We ended our last article with this question: Given the problematic nature of their definition of a dispensation, how did Dispensationalists come to divide the Word of God into three, four, six, seven, eight, or nine time periods, "during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God?" We find the answer in the Dispensationalist view of 2 Timothy 2:15 — "Study to show thyself

approved unto God, a workman that need not be ashamed, *rightly dividing the Word of truth.*"

In the Dispensationalist view, how you interpret the entire Bible depends on how you view that verse, especially the last phrase. And they are absolutely right, but not for the reason they put forth.

The Dispensationalist View of "Rightly Dividing"

There are two major views of the phrase "rightly dividing the Word of truth." The Dispensationalist view says that "rightly dividing" means, literally, dividing up God's Word — dividing up as in "cutting up." Let me quote a dispensationalist spokesman who comments on this verse:

The Bible student is to very carefully cut and divide the Word of God in order to understand it aright. As an illustration of this, consider the dissection of the human body... In much the same way, when we study God's Word we must carefully cut and dissect the Word of truth... May the God of truth enable us to carefully and rightly dissect His precious Word...²

The result of this view is that many Dispensationalists teach a division between what they see as the Jewish portions and the Church portions of the Word of God, as well as divisions into various "periods of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God". On that basis, classic Dispensationalism postulates separate programs for the nation of Israel and the "Gentile church," extending out into eternity — one group of people in the New Heaven, the other group of people on the New Earth. There is some degree of disagreement among Dispensationalists about which group will be where for eternity. There is also significant disagreement among them about where to "cut and divide" the Bible between Jewish parts and Church parts. And as we saw in our first article,

there is significant disagreement among them about the number of dispensations, where they begin and end, whether or not they overlap, and so on.

Scripturally Supportable?

The question is, does Scripture support this view of the phrase "rightly dividing the Word of truth"? Dispensationalists are correct that the answer to that question is indeed foundational. It is a key to how you interpret the entire Word of God.

In evaluating the Dispensationalist view of 2 Timothy 2:15, we must, as always, begin by looking at the original language in context. We find that the word that is translated "rightly dividing" in the Old and New King James Bibles, and in several others, is a single word in the Greek. It is a form of the Greek verb *orthotomeo*. This is a very interesting word.

In New Testament times, *orthotomeo* was primarily a civil engineering term. It was used, for example, as a road building term. The idea of the word was "to cut straight," or "to guide on a straight path." The idea was to cut a roadway in such a manner that people who would travel over that road would arrive at their destination directly, without deviation. *Orthotomeo* was also used as a mining term. It meant to drill a straight mine shaft so that the miners could get quickly and safely to the "mother lode."

There is another word in Greek, *katatomeo*, which means "to cut into sections." But that is not the word that the Apostle Paul, under divine inspiration, uses in 2nd Timothy 2:15. Paul is not talking about "rightly dividing" in terms of dissecting the Word of God, or cutting it into sections based on Jew and Gentile, or Israel and Church, or any other criterion. It is interesting that the Apostle Paul does use that other word — *katatomeo*, cutting up — in Philippians 3:2, where he says, literally, "beware of those who would divide you up" — in other words, beware of those who would try to make a difference among believers between Jews and Gentiles.

Striving About Words to No Profit

What, then, is the proper meaning of *orthotomeo* — "rightly dividing" the Word of truth? What is intended is not the arbitrary dissection of Scripture, but reading, teaching, and preaching Scripture accurately, without being turned aside by false teaching or man-made agendas. This, indeed, is the context of 2 Timothy 2:15. In the verses preceding, Paul emphasizes the unity of all believers, and instructs Timothy to solemnly warn the church "not to strive about words to no profit" —

"Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel, for which I suffer trouble as an evildoer, even to the point of chains; but the Word of God is not chained. Therefore I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him. If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself. Remind them of these things, charging them before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin [spiritual subversion] of the hearers. Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:8-15)

How do these principles apply to specific Dispensationalist teachings? What are some of the dangerous results of dissecting God's Word like a cadaver? We'll look at these questions in upcoming articles.

References:

1. As we've noted previously, there are also fundamental problems in what might be called classical Covenant theology. Many Covenant theologians see a total transference of Old Testament prophecies and promises from the nation of Israel

to the New Testament church, and no future at all in God's plans for ethnic Israel. On this basis they say, among other things, that infant baptism is required in the New Testament church as the replacement of Jewish circumcision in the Old, and that it has the same purpose. I believe that both of those positions are Scripturally insupportable; they are subjects for Biblical exposition and discussion at another time, the Lord willing. But I hope it will suffice for the moment to remind ourselves that there are disagreements among Covenant men just as there are among Dispensationalists, and these also bespeak underlying problems in the definition of key theological terms.

2. Rev. George Parsons, "Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth," as viewed on 10/5/09 at the website of Middletown (Connecticut) Bible Church, <http://www.middletownbiblechurch.org/dispens/rightlydi.htm>.

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In the original Greek, this passage tells us that God will "re-gather together in one all things in Christ."

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