

DIVIDE and CONQUER  
Bro David Christiansen, Seattle Ecclesia  
November 2005

II Timothy 2:15, in the King James Version reads, “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” As Bible Students we quote this text fairly often. Usually we focus on the word “study” because, of course, we want to be approved unto God. And the text does clearly tell us to study to do so. But I believe that the last phrase, namely – “rightly dividing the word of truth,” completes the entire thought that Paul is trying to convey.

There are millions of Christians out there that more or less study their Bibles. The word “study” here means to use diligence, and there are many who do diligently study their Bibles and diligently work on their characters. And they do indeed want to be approved unto God. And many have a workman-like attitude as they study so that they won’t feel ashamed before God.

But the question is, do they “rightly divide” the word of truth? From my perspective, if they are believing in a God that will torture most of his human creation forever because they fail to “rightly divide” what they call his truth, or because they don’t have a desire to even find God’s truth, then I don’t think that they do “rightly divide” God’s word of truth.

It is very interesting that God wants us to divide his truth. Think about that for a moment. God has given us an assignment, as it were. We are to not only divide his word, but rightly divide his word of truth. How can we do that as mere mortals?

You see the text is giving us instructions for being approved unto God. And we learn right away that God wants us to participate in the process. We have to do something. This is no surprise. We are told to run a race, put on armor, to work out our own salvations with fear and trembling, and in II Timothy 2:15, we are told to rightly divide his word of truth.

So God gives us the words in his Bible but we seem to be left on our own to divide it correctly. Is this an impossible task? No wonder so many teach today “only believe.” Maybe the task is just too daunting to them. Perhaps it

would behoove us to see what God, through Paul, was trying to teach us when he told Timothy that God's truth should be "rightly divided."

First let's take a look at the context of our scripture. Paul is writing this letter from a prison in Rome. He was feeling a bit abandoned. Many of the brethren had left the area and Paul longed to be with his friend Timothy.

In chapter one he shows his thankfulness to the LORD even though he is in chains. And he is encouraging Timothy to continue faithful while reminding him that he need feel no shame when being persecuted for being faithful.

Let's read II Timothy 2:3-7 from Weymouth as I think there are some keys for figuring out just how to rightly divide God's truth. "As a good soldier of Christ Jesus accept your share of suffering. Every one who serves as a soldier avoids becoming entangled in civil life so that he may satisfy the officer who enlisted him. And if any one takes part in an athletic contest, he gets no prize unless he obeys the rules. The harvestman who labours in the field must be the first to get a share of the crop. Reflect on what I am saying: the LORD will give you understanding in everything."

Paul uses three brief metaphors here to make a point to Timothy, and us, about what a Christian should be, do, and expect.

1) The first is as a soldier. A soldier wears armor, a soldier fights and a good soldier keeps himself from being entangled by the business of the world because he is focused on his mission. We have scriptures that tell us to put on the whole armor of God and we are told to fight the good fight of faith. Now these two metaphors by themselves are very good as to certain aspects of being a good soldier of the cross, but they could be somewhat ambiguous. You see putting on the armor of God and fighting a good fight of faith can mean different things to different people. But Paul makes it clear when he says "a good soldier keeps himself from being entangled by the business of the world." That's a straightforward statement. Paul also says in Philippians 3:13, "this one thing I do." And he says in 1 Corinthians 2:2, "For I am determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

Our focus needs to be on spiritual things, our spiritual battles — not on the business of the world, or the battles of this world, for that matter. Am I saying that we shouldn't go to work in the world to support our families? Of

course not! That would make us worse than unbelievers. What I *am* saying is that we should stay out of the world's business.

Maybe it's better expressed this way: Think about our president. He claims to be a Christian, and that's all well and good. But sometimes the leader of a nation has to make decisions that are, quite frankly, unchristian. If another country or entity attacks our country, like at Pearl Harbor or the Twin Towers, what is the president supposed to do?

If he is a good soldier of the cross he would have to take the position of turning the other cheek. The problem is he has also sworn to protect the people from enemy attacks. And many of those people are not even Christians so could not possibly understand the principle of turning the other cheek. Presidents Bush and Roosevelt chose striking back rather than turning the other cheek, because they felt that they needed to protect the people in their country. And both may have felt that they were "fighting the good fight of faith" by doing so.

But you see, the Christian has a different set of standards to live by and returning evil for evil is not what a good soldier of the cross is supposed to do. But a president is supposed to use whatever military forces he might have to protect his country's citizens. So the very position of being president of a country is contrary to the position that a Christian should take. How do we rectify that? There is an easy answer — don't get involved in politics! Politicians have a different set of rules that they must follow. Politicians are deeply involved in the world's business by definition, regardless of any Christian claims they might make. And Christians are involved in the Lord's business, regardless of any personal harm that may come to them through it. These philosophies are contrary to each other.

So Paul has given us a key to understanding "rightly dividing" God's truth. If you are in a political position, 1) You will have to start seeing things from a worldly standpoint and, 2) if you are a Christian politician you will most certainly be put in a compromising position with regards to your Christian walk. These things can't help but deter you from rightly dividing God's truth because I guarantee you that the politician will always take the worldly stance on a matter. If they don't they won't be a politician for long. I believe that President Bush is walking a thin line trying to juggle his Christianity and his worldly position of political power.

But this principle trickles down. It does not just apply to politicians. One can easily get involved in politics without even running for office. After all, it is a natural thing to want to protect our families from harm and make things better for them. And what better way to do that than be a political activist for what you think is right.

Many of the Christian leaders of today have gotten very involved with politics. We see the so-called Christian Right aligning itself with a certain political party. And so much so that they seem to condone and even welcome war much of the time. In other words, they have the same political view as the president. How does that square with not returning evil for evil? And what doctrines do these Christian political activists teach? For the most part they are involved with churches that teach hell fire and brimstone, trinity, immortal soul and a host of other non-scriptural doctrines. It's sad, but it appears that much of their time is spent on political matters. Matters that the LORD will resolve in his due time anyway. They don't have time to rightly divide the word of truth; they are too busy trying to save this world. Why would anyone want to save this world? Personally I am eagerly looking forward to the next one.

If you want help in rightly dividing God's word of truth take Paul's advice, stay away from the Christian Right, or the Christian left for that matter, for they are indeed entangled in the world's business. Be an activist for God, not for a political party or worldly organization. I think an overwhelming majority of Bible Students understand this concept and don't get involved with the business of the world. I think most of us don't get too uptight about what we see going on around us. And maybe, just maybe, that is one reason why we divide God's truth so differently than other Christians. And why what we call truth is so reasonable, so loving, so inclusive, so like God.

2) The second metaphor Paul uses is that of an athlete in a contest. He says in II Timothy 2:5 (Weymouth), "And if any one takes part in an athletic contest, he gets no prize unless he obeys the rules." Hmm, what are the rules? I suspect that if I asked you all to make a list of these rules I would get a lot of different answers, and they would all be correct. But consider Matthew 22:37-40 (KJV): "Master which is the great commandment in the law? And Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy

neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

This, then, is very similar to the first metaphor, “this one thing I do.” The rule is to stay focused on God, his plan, his son and your brethren. How much easier this is when one loves the Heavenly Father with all his being.

There are some sub-rules as well. The LORD says in Proverbs 23:26, “give me thine heart.” Jesus says, “...If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.” (Luke 9:23) And in Micah 6:8 we read “...and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” And there are many, many more sub-rules and when we break these rules it sets us behind in our walk.

We know that we have an advocate who deals with the Father on our behalf. The more we strive to follow these “rules” the more we are showing our Father that we do indeed love Him with all our heart, mind, and soul. And the more we don’t follow these rules the further we get from our Father and the tougher it becomes to rightly divide his word of truth.

Have you ever read anything about Olympic athletes? Their lives are not their own. They are so focused on training to win that some have no other life to speak of. But they know they have to do that to win. And that’s what we must do: “...Press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, (Philippians 3:14) and “...love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.” (Matthew 22:37) If we do that we won’t have time for much else. And even when we are doing other things, like working, driving, going to school, etc., we can work on developing patience and love for our enemies so our focus is still on the Heavenly Father.

As we know from recent news headlines, some athletes try to cheat. They take performance enhancing drugs to give them an unfair advantage. That is expressly against the rules and if caught they are eliminated from competition. Brethren, we have no short cuts as we press toward the mark. If we try to cheat, God knows.

Here’s an example of one who tried to do just that: In Acts 8 we learn about a man we call Simon the Sorcerer. Verse 9 says, “But there was a certain

man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one...” and as we go through the story we find out that Philip came to the town where Simon was practicing his sorcery. Simon watched Philip preach the kingdom and the people believed Philip. Simon, it seems, wanted a piece of the action and in verse 13 we learn that Simon “believed” and was baptized. “He continued with Philip, and wondered, beholding the miracles and signs which were done.”

Simon saw that people received the Holy Spirit by the laying on of the apostles’ hands and he wanted that power. You see he didn’t want to just get the Holy Spirit; he wanted the power of giving the Holy Spirit by the laying on of his hands. Simon wasn’t interested in accepting God’s will for himself — he wanted more. Had Simon loved the LORD his God with all his heart, mind, and soul he would not have coveted the apostles’ position. But Simon tried to cheat to get what he wanted.

What did he do? The narrative says that he tried to buy the power that the Apostles had with money. One of the sub-rules on my list was “My son, give me thine heart and let thine eyes observe my ways.” Well, Simon’s eyes observed what was going on but he had not completely given his heart to the LORD, so he didn’t comprehend what a mistake he had made by trying to buy power with money. And, of course, Peter took the guesswork out of the situation very quickly when he sharply rebuked Simon.

You see, Simon didn’t get it. Simon heard the message of the apostles. He observed their ways. But he didn’t see, or discern, what was really going on because he hadn’t really given his heart to the LORD. Peter tells him “for thy heart is not right in the sight of God.” (Acts 8:21) Had he loved the LORD with all his heart, mind, and soul he would have been able to rightly divide God’s word of truth and he would have known that neither Peter nor any of the other apostles could have, or would have, sold him the power of laying on of hands.

What did it cost him? Peter says in Acts 8:21: “Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter.” Brother Russell’s comment on this text in reprint 2110: “Up to this time Simon had passed for a thoroughly converted man... Peter tells him with great plainness of speech...that he is still unregenerate — merely a spectator and not a participator in spiritual things.” If Simon had any love at

all in his heart for the LORD, Peter's rebuke would have cut him to the quick.

3) The third metaphor, found in II Timothy 2:6 is that of a husbandman, or farmer. King James says that the farmer must be the first partaker of the fruits.

What are the fruits of our labor? I'll ask it another way. What fruits do we get while we are laboring in the harvest field? We believe that he is talking here about the fruits of the Spirit. After all, what are we trying to accomplish during our walk? Aren't we trying to grow in the graces and fruits of the Spirit? The world is not laboring in the harvest field, they are not trying to grow in the graces and fruits of the Spirit. The church class, the laborers, are supposed to get those fruits first, in the Gospel Age. The world will work on and receive those things later, in the Millennial Age.

To make my point here I'm going to again call your attention to Philippians 3:14, from Weymouth, "with my eyes fixed on the goal I push on to secure the prize of God's heavenward call in Christ Jesus." The King James says he pressed toward the mark.... Evidently the goal or mark is different than the prize. We believe it is.

We know what the prize is, i.e., immortality, the divine nature. What is the goal or mark? The scriptures answer this for us. We are to learn to love the LORD thy God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind. Isn't that the goal? And we don't have time to mention all the sub-goals that we work on daily, but they include:

- Learning to hate sin but love the sinners
- Learning to give our lives for the brethren
- Learning to forgive, not just seven times, but seventy times seven times
- Learning to accept persecution and suffering joyfully
- Ultimately, loving even our enemies

I could go on and on, but the point is: As we learn these things and as we are able to do them better and better, we are reaching our goal of loving our Heavenly Father with all our heart, mind, and soul.

So that is our goal — to attain as many, and as much of, the fruits of the Spirit that we can. And the prize is to be part of the glorified church and receive the divine nature. So we press toward, i.e., we work at achieving, we focus on the goal. I see many in the systems today focusing on the prize only. They say all you have to do is confess your sins and welcome Jesus into your heart, and you will be welcomed into heaven through the pearly gates. That is not what Paul is saying.

So, these three metaphors that Paul talks briefly about in II Timothy chapter 2 can be very helpful in determining whether or not one is rightly dividing God's Word of truth. But Paul really gets to the heart of the matter in verse 7 when he says, "Reflect on what I am saying, the Lord will give you understanding in everything." And how do we get understanding? Through His Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the key. It is the cord that binds it all together. We believe that what Paul is saying in verse 7 is that we definitely need that Holy Spirit to be able to rightly divide God's word of truth. But we see that it goes further. As we consider or reflect upon what he has just said, the LORD will give us insight into these matters through his Holy Spirit. Once again we learn that we have a part in the "rightly dividing." God doesn't just open up our heads and pour in the Holy Spirit. We have to do something. And if we do, we are assured that God will give us understanding through his Holy Spirit.

The word *reflect* in verse 7 is translated *consider* in the King James Version. Young's says it means "to perceive with the mind." Professor Strong says, "to exercise the mind (observe) i.e. (figuratively) to comprehend, to heed." We should *heed* what the LORD tells us through people like Paul.

But what I really find profound in verse 7 is that Paul is giving us a great lesson. If you think on these things, if you study them, if you are diligent about being a good soldier, an honest athlete, and a good farmer, God will give you the understanding that you need to make your calling and election sure, through his Holy Spirit. And when you think about it, when one understands, isn't that because he has rightly divided God's word of truth?

So, we have seen the context in which II Timothy 2:15 is placed. And we see that Paul is giving us some good advice to follow if we want to rightly divide God's word of truth.

Now we are going to approach the text from a different angle. Let's start by finding out the definition of the words "rightly divide." The two words together are from the Greek word 3718 in Strong's Concordance. It means to "make a straight cut, i.e. figuratively to dissect correctly." We use this language sometimes today. When someone gives you directions or instructions they might conclude with "do you have that straight?" Which means "did you divide that information that I gave you correctly, so that you know exactly what you need to do?"

Let's take a quick look at a couple of examples of dividing correctly in the Old Testament. Let's go back to the parting of the Red Sea, found in Exodus 14. You may remember that the children of Israel departed Egypt after the last deadly plague. They were led by God and eventually found themselves at the Red Sea and in quite a predicament. As we might say today, they were between a rock and a hard place, the impassable Red Sea before them and Pharaoh's army behind them.

God told Moses how to remedy this situation in Exodus 14:16, "But lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out thine hand over the sea, and divide it: and the children of Israel shall go on dry ground through the midst of the sea."

God gave Moses simple, yet explicit, instructions on how to "rightly divide" the water. Did Moses follow those instructions? We learn in Exodus 14: 21 that he did indeed. "And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided."

There is a key phrase in that text that we believe to be central to our main theme in this discourse, and central to our faith as well. And the LORD caused the sea to go back. Moses followed the directions perfectly — but — God was the one who divided the water. And so we must remember that we can follow all the directions that God gives us to the best of our ability but we cannot rightly divide the word of truth without God's Holy Spirit, without God's power.

Before I share the second story I would like to read you a passage from Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown commentary regarding II Timothy 2:15.

“Rightly dividing” – “rightly handling” (Vulgate) “rightly administrating” (Alford); literally – cutting “straight” or “right”: the metaphor being from a father or steward cutting and distributing bread among his children [Vitringa and Calvin].”

And with that thought in mind, here is another situation that involved Moses and the dividing of some water. The story is found in Numbers 20:1-13 and starts off in the desert of Zin. The Israelites had wandered in the desert almost 40 years by this time and they seemed to be fed up with it. They bitterly complained to Moses, so Moses and Aaron went to the tabernacle to seek God’s wisdom and instruction. And they got it. In verse 8, from the NIV, we read God’s instructions, “Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring the water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink.”

Again, Moses was given clear and fairly simple instructions. Did he follow them? Verse 9 says “So Moses took the staff from the LORD’s presence just as he commanded him.” Good so far. Verse 10 says “He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock” – he’s still on track – but then verse 10 continues and Moses said to them “listen you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?” And then Moses totally leaves the LORD’s instructions, as we read in verse 11, “Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff.”

Moses was supposed to talk to the rock. Why did he change at that moment and decide to strike the rock? It seems fairly clear here that Moses was angry. The children of Israel had quarreled with him about the lack of water. Quarrelling will often bring on anger. I think they were all getting weary of wandering in the desert. He calls them rebels. He asks them “must we bring you water out of the rock?”

The LORD says to Moses and Aaron in verse 12, “Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.”

They got the water, God wasn’t going to let them die of thirst, but there was a price to pay. After about 38 years of wandering in the desert wilderness, Moses was told that he would not be bringing the Israelites into the promised land. What a blow.

I like the fact that it is water that gets divided in both of these stories, because water represents God's truth. And we can easily see that when the LORD's explicit, yet simple, instructions were followed the waters of the Red Sea were divided rightly and the children of Israel walked straight through, just as God wanted. You see, Moses divided the water correctly, by following God's instructions and then allowing God to do the actual dividing.

But in the second story, Moses didn't follow the LORD's instructions; he didn't divide the water among his children correctly. He didn't obey all of God's rules and he paid a tremendous price.

Brethren, there is a reason why God gives us instructions in his word about being angry. Proverbs 15:18, "A wrathful man stirreth up strife; but he that is slow to anger appeaseth strife." And Ephesians 4:31 says "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice."

When Moses was to divide up the water among the children of Israel, like a father would divide up bread among his children, he was angry. And that anger impaired his judgment. Numbers 20:12 says Moses did not trust God enough — Moses didn't trust God?! Of course Moses trusted God, but when he was angry his judgment was impaired for a time, and during that time evidently he did not trust God enough, and consequently he was not able to rightly divide the water among his children.

Anger, strife, bitterness, wrath, malice — these can all hinder us from rightly dividing God's water of truth, if even for a short time. If our judgment is impaired because of anger while we are studying, are we sure that we are rightly dividing God's word of truth? Or would we be just like Moses, getting most of it right but missing something during that time?

Brethren, ask God for a greater measure of his Holy Spirit, daily. "...how much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" (Luke 11:13) The more of the Holy Spirit that you have, the more rightly you can divide God's truth, and the better attitude you will have as well. For as it says in Galatians 5:22 & 23 "...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness,

temperance: against such there is no law.” And with that demeanor one will have a much easier time rightly dividing God’s word of truth.

Divide and conquer is a war strategy. Are we fighting a war? Yes! We battle the world, the flesh, and the devil daily. It is the new creature that is at war and only the new creature can conquer. Romans 8:37 says “Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.” Key words, “through him that loved us.”

- *If we accept as good soldiers of Christ our share of suffering,*
- *If we do not entangle ourselves in the business of the world,*
- *If we obey the rules as we run the race for the mark of the prize of the high calling,*
- *If we are good farmers and acquire the fruits of the Spirit while we are laboring in the harvest field,*
- *And, most importantly, if we allow God’s Holy Spirit to do the actual dividing of God’s word of truth —*

Then we will be able to rightly divide God’s word of truth and we will be more than conquerors. Brethren, may we all divide and conquer.