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RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH.

BY

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*A Sermon preached in Duane Street Church, New York, on the third day of October, 1844, at the installation of the pastor.**

“Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of Truth.”—2 TIM. ii. 15.

SOME parts of Holy Scripture seem not at any time to have received as much attention as their importance merits, nor as much as is given to other passages, of no greater moment. As an example of what is here asserted, may be adduced the solemn admonition of Paul, in the verse immediately preceding the text, in which he directs Timothy to charge the preachers over whom he had superintendence, (and of course all), “before the Lord, that they strive not about words to no profit, but to the subverting of the hearers.” Mere logomachies, or contentions about words, have been productive of incalculable mischief in the Church of God. These unprofitable disputes among the

* This discourse was not prepared for the press, but has been furnished by a member of the author's family from his posthumous manuscripts.

professed followers of Christ, have not only unsettled and subverted the minds of many within the pale of the Church, but have been the occasion of deep-rooted prejudice in those who were without; by which their conversion has in many cases been prevented or hindered. It has long been remarked, that no spirit is more pungent and bitter than that of theologians in their contentions with one another; and it has often happened, that the less the difference, the more virulent the acrimony. When the controversy relates merely, or principally, to words, the strife is more obstinate than when it relates to things, for in that case both parties may be in the right.

But it may be asked, must the servant of God yield the truth to any one who chooses to impugn it, or is he at liberty to make a compromise with error for the sake of peace? I answer, by no means. He is bound to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints, and to hold fast the form of sound words which he has received. Controversy will be necessary so long as error exists, but two things are strictly forbidden: first, unprofitable contention, the tendency of which is "to subvert the hearers;" and, secondly, angry contention, for "the servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle to all men." No man has a right to compromise a single truth, for this is the sacred deposit which he, in common with other ministers, holds for the edification of the Church; and which they are bound to commit to other faithful men, to be transmitted to those who may come after them.

It is not our duty to enter into controversy with all those who may differ from us in matters not fundamental. "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations." "For one believeth that he may eat all things; another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him that eateth not judge him that eateth, for God hath received him. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind." In all such cases, if God's glory be the end, the person will be accepted, although he may be in trivial error. To seek the honor and glory of God, is the grand characteristic of all true Christians. "For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord; whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord's."

In our text, Timothy is exhorted "to approve himself to God as a workman;" this term carries with it the idea of skill in his calling. He cannot with propriety be called a workman who undertakes a business which he knows not how to execute. At any rate, the "workman who needeth not to be ashamed," must be skilled in what relates to his profession. Two sorts of men should, therefore, be excluded from the gospel ministry: first, those who will not work; secondly, those who know not how to perform their work aright. Any man who fails in either of these particulars, will bring shame upon himself. It appears to be implied that peculiar

wisdom is requisite in discharging the duties of this office, for it is added, "rightly dividing the word of truth." Accurate discrimination is here evidently required. Not every ignorant declaimer is capable of doing this. He who would "rightly divide the word of truth" must, unless he be inspired, diligently and for a long time study the Bible. He should study it with all the aids which can be obtained, human and divine. The body cannot be dissected by one who has never studied anatomy, and it would be reckoned great presumption in an ignorant person to undertake to perform the most difficult surgical operation. His motives might be good, and he might be persuaded that he was doing a good thing, but that would not alter the nature of the case, nor render quackery the less dangerous. Such a man could not *rightly divide*, or dissect the parts, so as to do no injury to the vital organs. But does it not argue greater presumption, for ignorant men to thrust themselves into the office of the holy ministry? Is it true that this is a work which can be performed without learning? Or that little danger is to be apprehended from the mistakes into which unskilful workmen may fall? We shall be better able to answer these questions, when we have considered what is requisite in "rightly dividing the word of truth," which is the single object which it is proposed to keep in view in the remainder of this discourse.

TRUTH is of various kinds—physical, mathematical, moral, &c.; but here one particular kind of

truth is referred to, called the WORD OF TRUTH—that is, the truth of the Word of God—the truth of divine revelation—THEOLOGICAL TRUTH. The Bible was not given to teach men philosophy, or the arts which have respect to this life; its object is to teach the true knowledge of God, and the true and only method of salvation. I might here spend time in showing how much preparatory learning and study are requisite to such a knowledge of the Bible as he ought to possess, who undertakes to be an expositor of its truth. But I will pass all this over, as sufficiently evident, and proceed to make some observations on the important duty of “rightly dividing the word of truth.”

1. The truths of God's Word must be carefully distinguished from error. Light and darkness are not more opposite than truth and error. In some cases, error comes forth into the open light of day, in its native deformity, avowing its hostility to the word of God, and professing it as its object to subvert the Holy Scriptures, under the pretext of delivering the world from bondage, and obtaining liberty for men to live as they list. With regard to this species of error, there is no need of much skill to run the line of division between it and truth. Every honest mind can at once perceive the wide difference; and, as for those who have pleasure in unrighteousness, it is often the judgment which they incur from a just God. It has often been observed, that infidels are as incapable of *perceiving* as of *loving* the truth. But some-

times error assumes the garb, and uses the language of truth. Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light; no marvel, therefore, that error and falsehood should wear a disguise fitted to deceive the unwary, and, if it were possible, the very elect. In all ages of the world, false teachers have existed, and often abounded. False Apostles, false prophets, deceitful workers, have ever been the pests of the Church of God, under every dispensation. And the earth is still inundated with floods of error. Through pride and licentiousness, men of corrupt minds still endeavor insidiously to sap the foundation of Gospel truth; the time is come when many will not endure sound doctrine. Here the skilful workman must be on the alert. Here all his wisdom must be put in requisition, to detect, expose, and refute every form of error and heresy which may arise. By his skill, fidelity, and vigilance, the tender flock of Christ must be preserved from "wolves in sheep's clothing." By a clear exhibition of Gospel truth, on all the important points of religion, the people should be so instructed, and so imbued with the truth, that error shall make no impression on them. Error is a creeping pestilence; no error can promote holiness. The connection between truth and holiness is most intimate and indissoluble.

2. But it is necessary to divide the truth not only from error, but from philosophy, and mere human opinions and speculations. Many who do not reject the truth, yet so cover her with robes of their own weaving, that she cannot be seen in her

lovely simplicity. They are forever connecting with the doctrines of God's Word, their own wire-drawn and uncertain speculations. We have too much metaphysical reasoning in our theology. The truth of God is not illustrated by such methods; it is rather obscured and adulterated. Thus, it often happens, that a sermon contains very little Scripture truth. After the text is uttered, the preacher has done with the Bible, and the hearers are fed, or rather starved, by some abstruse discussion of a subject, not treated of in the word of God; or which is there taken for granted as a thing which requires no discussion, or which is above the human intellect. Now, whether these speculations are true or false, is of little consequence; for they serve neither to confirm our faith, nor to strengthen our love to God and man. This is not the pure wheat of the divine word; it is chaff, and "what is the chaff to the wheat?" This is not rightly to divide the word of truth. The spiritual workman must take pains to separate the word of God from all admixture of mere human philosophy, and metaphysical speculation. It is the "sincere milk of the Word" after which the new-born child of grace thirsts, and by which he grows.

3. The skilful workman must be able to distinguish between fundamental truths, and such as are not fundamental. All Bible truth is important, and no part to be rejected or neglected. But some truths must be known and believed, or the person cannot be saved; while there are other truths

which true Christians may be ignorant of, and while ignorant may deny. There are two grand marks of fundamental doctrine. 1. That the denial of them destroys the system. 2. That the knowledge of them is essential to piety. All truth is essential to the perfection of the system; fundamental truths, to its existence.

4. Rightly to divide the word of truth, we must arrange it in such order, as that it may be most easily and effectually understood. In every system some things stand in the place of *principles*, on which the rest are built. He who would be a skilful workman in God's building, must take much pains with the foundation; but he must not dwell forever on the first principles of the doctrine of Christ, but should endeavor to lead his people on to perfection in the knowledge of the truth.

5. A good workman will so divide the word of truth, as clearly to distinguish between THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL; between *the covenant of works and the covenant of grace*. No mistakes in religion have been more frequent or more fatal, than those which relate to the terms of a sinner's acceptance with God, or the true method of justification. These mistakes are the more to be dreaded, because they seem to have the sanction of reason, which dictates that a just God will treat men according to their works. Upon a superficial view, it would seem as if the doctrine of grace, or justification by faith alone, was unfriendly to holiness. More than one-half of the Christain world, therefore, are misled by error, more or less dangerous, on this point

of vital importance. Some are so blinded to the deficiencies of their own righteousness, that they place their whole dependence on their own good deeds: while others are willing to compromise the matter, and if their own merit may be permitted to come in for a principal share in the honor of their salvation, they are willing that Christ should obtain the second place, and that by his merits their own small deficiencies should be covered. By a correction of error on this point of doctrine, Luther began the reformation, and called it *the article of the standing or falling of the Church*. And this was correct, for an error here vitiates the whole theology of the man who holds it; and the minister who does not clearly preach the doctrine of justification by faith in the righteousness of Christ, though he be as learned as Paul, or as eloquent as Apollos, is not such a workman as needeth not to be ashamed. Such a one can never rightly divide the word of truth. If he miss the mark on this cardinal point, you will find him bewildered, and bewildering his hearers everywhere else. The Gospel in his mouth will give no distinct and intelligible sound, but will be a vague and confused report; and if he *essentially* err, in regard to the method of a sinner's justification, he brings himself under the anathema of Paul for preaching another gospel—which, however, is not another, for it brings no good news to lost sinners; but sets men at work to get into paradise at the old gate, which was long ago shut up, and has for thousands of years been guarded by the fiery-flaming sword of

Divine justice. Here, again, men are prone, when driven from one error, to fly to the opposite; or rather in shunning one extreme to run upon the other. For while some seek salvation by the works of the law, others deny that we have anything to do with the law, and actually "by faith make void the law," pretending and teaching that the obligation of the moral law has ceased, since Christ has obeyed it in our stead. Now, this antinomian leaven is a sweet morsel to the appetite of the carnal professor; for he loves safety and ease, but hates self-denial and holy living. Others again talk of a *new law* for Christians, which they call the law of liberty or sincerity, because it does not condemn for every transgression, as does the moral law, and does not require absolute perfection in our obedience, but is satisfied with sincerity; just as if God could change the requisitions of his law without changing his own nature, or as if it were not most absurd to suppose that any law could require less than perfect obedience to its own precepts. But we hear from another quarter that the minister of Jesus should preach *free grace*, and finished salvation, but not utter the thunders of the law, and thus produce a spirit of bondage by bringing back the terrors of Sinai. Such persons may suppose that they are the only friends of free grace; but that minister who ceases to exhibit the holy law of God in its spirituality, extent, and binding obligation, may cease to preach the Gospel also; for where there are none sick, there will be no need of a physician; and where no law is preached, there will be no convic-

tion of sin, and none crying out "what must we do to be saved?"—so that it is most evident the law must precede the Gospel in the sinner's experience, and also in rightly dividing the word of truth. I do not mean to sanction the absurd practical error, that for a time, and it may be a considerable time, the Gospel should be withheld from the people. For what is this but to usurp the prerogative of God? In any audience, who can tell but there may be at least one convinced sinner, who needs instantly the consolations of the Gospel? And they who have already believed, need continually the sprinkling on their heart and conscience of the same blood which at first gave them peace. Let no minister of Christ, therefore, presume to keep back, during a single sermon, the precious Gospel of Jesus Christ, which, probably, some poor sinner is hearing for the last time. Who that has read the Acts of the Apostles, does not know that days and weeks are not necessary for the conversion of a soul by Almighty grace? Conviction by the law, and reconciliation by the Gospel, may sometimes take place in a few minutes. The spiritual workman, therefore, who wields the two-edged sword of the Spirit, must so direct and manage this weapon of proof, as to render it most efficient in penetrating between the joints and marrow; yea, between the soul and the spirit, so that the very thoughts of the heart may be made manifest.

Let the law be faithfully proclaimed, as binding on every creature, and as cursing every impenitent sinner; and let the utter inability of man to satisfy

its demands be clearly set forth, not as an excuse, but as a fault; and then let the riches of grace in Christ Jesus be fully exhibited and freely offered, and let all—however great their guilt—be urged to accept of unmerited pardon, and complete salvation.

6. Another thing very necessary to a correct division of the word of truth, is that the promises and threatenings contained in the Scriptures be applied to the characters to which they properly belong. How often do we hear a preacher expatiating on the rich consolations of the exceeding great and precious promises of God, when no mortal can tell, from anything which he says, to whom they are applicable. In much of preaching, there is a vague and indiscriminate application of the special promises of the covenant of grace, as though all who heard them were true Christians, and had a claim to the comfort which they offer. This is not a skilful division of the word of truth. In such a division, the saint and the sinner are clearly distinguished by decisive scripture marks; so that every one may have a fair opportunity of ascertaining to which class he belongs, and what prospects lie before him. Rightly dividing the word of truth includes, therefore, what may be termed *characteristical* preaching—that is, a clear and just delineation of character, by using the pencil of inspiration. For if, in this business, men follow their own fancies, and lay down marks of piety not authorized by the Word of God, they will often cry peace to those to whom God has not spoken peace, and will

give unnecessary pain to the children of God by obscuring their evidences, and perplexing their minds with fears and scruples by a false representation of the true characteristics of genuine piety. It is much to be regretted that this accurate discrimination in preaching has gone so much out of use in our times. It is but seldom that we hear a discourse from the pulpit which is calculated to afford much aid to Christians in ascertaining their own true character; or which will serve to detect the hypocrite and formalist, and drive them from all their false refuges. In the best days of the reformed churches, such discriminating delineation of character, by the light of Scripture, formed an important part of almost every sermon. But we are now more attentive to the rules of rhetoric than to the marks of true religion. How do Owen, Flavel, Boston, and Erskine abound in marks of distinction between the true and false professor? And the most distinguished preachers of our own country—the Mathers, Shepards, Stoddards, Edwardses, as also the Blairs, Tennents, Davies, and Dickinsons, were wise in so dividing the word of truth, that all might receive their portion in due season. But certainly the word of truth should be so handled, that every person who does not turn away his eyes may see the lineaments of his true character, reflected from the word, as the image from the glass. This, indeed, requires something more than a fertile imagination and a ready utterance—more than the learning of the schools, or profound critical acumen. It requires that the preacher study much upon his

knees, that he examine his own heart with unceasing care, that "the Word of God dwell in him richly, in all wisdom and spiritual understanding;" and also that he converse frequently and freely with experienced Christians. In these matters there are many private persons who are wiser than their teachers; and a preacher, of true humility, will be often glad to learn from those who have had longer or deeper experience than himself. While others are seeking his counsel in regard to their spiritual condition, he is learning from them, for these are lessons which we can best learn from the living subject.

7. But finally, the word of God should be so handled, that it may be adapted to Christians in different states and stages of the divine life; for while some Christians are like "strong men," others are but "babes in Christ, who must be fed with milk, and not with strong meat." Christ taught his disciples as they were able to bear it, and reserved many things which he wished to say, to the time when they were capable of understanding his meaning. The same course was pursued by Paul. We are bound, indeed, "to declare the whole counsel of God," but in due order, at proper times, and with a wise reference to the strength and spiritual attainments of our hearers. We must "keep nothing back which is profitable," but he who is wise to win souls, will judge correctly when, and in what way, particular parts of the system of truth should be inculcated. Christ will not have

the bruised reed broken, nor the smoking flax quenched.

Again, respect must be had to the condition of Christians, as they are found advancing in the divine life, or falling into a state of backsliding and declension. The former should be stimulated to persevere; the latter should be plucked as brands from the burning. The word of truth ought also to be so divided as to be adapted to the external circumstances of Christians. When in prosperity and honor, they should be admonished *not to be high-minded, but fear; not to trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us all things richly to enjoy.* They should be exhorted *to rejoice with trembling, and to use the world as not abusing it,* and should be reminded that by worldly prosperity, many professors have sunk low in piety, have become infatuated with the gaiety and pageantry of a vain world. Their affections fixed too intensely upon the creature, piety often withers under the sunshine of prosperity, and they become *conformed to the world*, participate in its pleasure, and court its honors. Even the real Christian, in this condition, has a morbid sensibility, which exposes him to take offence at the wounds inflicted by brotherly reproof, and friendly warning. Here the knife of the spiritual surgeon is wanted. A dangerous gangrene has arisen on the inner man, which must not be suffered to grow. Let the faithful warnings of the pulpit ring in the conscience of the professor who exhibits a character so doubtful, and stands in a position so danger-

ous. By fidelity ministers may give offence to their best supporters, and cause them to forsake their ministry; it may be so; it has been so, but he must *approve himself to God*. Whenever a minister of the gospel makes it his chief aim to please men, he ceases to be the servant of God. He must therefore reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long suffering and doctrine. Whether men will hear or forbear, he must be faithful to his Master and to their souls; and must, at every risk, clear his skirts of their blood, "warning every man, and teaching every man, with all meekness."

But God's people are often in affliction, and are led through deep waters. One billow succeeds another in quick succession, until they are almost overwhelmed, and, ready to sink, they cry out of the depths. Or, long-continued judgments press them down, until their spirits are broken with sorrow. "Many are the afflictions of the righteous." "Whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth."

But under all these sorrows he has provided for them refreshing cordials in his Word, that their fainting spirits may be relieved, and their broken hearts healed. These must be administered by the spiritual physician. These disconsolate and afflicted members of the flock are those who most need the pastor's care. Over these he must exercise a watchful and tender supervision; and however humble their habitation, and obscure their condition, they must be sought out and visited. Here you may see the difference between the man-pleasing, time-

servicing preacher, and the humble, faithful man of God; for while the former is continually courting and flattering the great, and feasting with the rich, the latter is searching for the sheep and lambs of his Master's flock, that he may feed and comfort them, in imitation of the Great Shepherd. He must condescend to men of low estate—remember the poor—visit the sick—and have a word in season for every weary soul; yea, he must pilot the departing pilgrim over Jordan to the land of promise.

There is a portion for the dying which must not be withheld. When heart and flesh fail, and the spirit is on the wing, and just ready to take her flight into unknown worlds, then must the guide of souls hold up the torch of truth to enlighten her as she passes through the "valley and shadow of death." Then let the voice of the Great Shepherd be heard in his word of promise, saying, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee." "In my Father's house are many mansions;" "Father, it is my will that where I am, there my disciples may be also, that they may behold my glory."

The exhortation of Paul to Timothy is to study to show himself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed: and he points out the method by which he might thus meet with the Divine approbation, viz., by rightly dividing the word of truth. What is included in this duty, we have now considered, and will leave the application to those who are interested in the subject. Ministers, who are accustomed to teach others,

ought to be willing to teach themselves also. They who have the skill and fidelity to apply the truth to the consciences of their hearers, should also be faithful to their own souls in detecting and censuring their own failures in time past, and should to the last day of their ministry endeavor to improve in every pastoral qualification, and in fidelity and skill in dividing the word of truth. Many useful inferences might be deduced from this subject, but I forbear to bring them forward, first because I have already consumed as much of your time as is proper; and, again, because I would not trench upon the ground which will more properly be occupied by those brethren who have been designated to take part in this solemn service.

I would conclude by remarking that my own ministry in the Word is coming fast to a close; and one of my greatest consolations is to see younger ministers raised up by the Great Head of the Church, to fill the places of us who must soon leave the stage. I consider the preaching of the Gospel to be the most honorable and important work in the world. The exigencies of the Church now demand ministers of the highest qualifications; and of all qualifications none is so indispensable as deep, unfeigned, spiritual piety—a heart imbued habitually with the Spirit of Christ, and disposed to count all things but loss for his sake; and willing to count not their own lives dear to them, so that they may finish their course with joy, and the ministry received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the Gospel of the grace of God.”

The wise, faithful, and laborious workman may be enabled to say with Paul, shortly before the close of his ministry, "I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing." Then, indeed, will the Supreme Judge manifest his approbation of all his faithful servants who have rightly divided the word of truth.