

*Mark A McGee*

*Rightly Dividing  
the Word of Truth*

*By*

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*GraceLife Bible Study Series*

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# Introduction

I want to share some thoughts with you that truly concern me. More and more Christians know less and less about God's Word. Have you noticed that fewer people bring their Bibles to church meetings now than years ago? Why is that? Is it because less copies of the Bible are available for Christians to read? Fewer Christians know how to use the Bible when talking with unsaved family and friends. They don't know where to find truth in the Word of Truth. When Christians get together, what is the first thing they talk about? Is it about a great truth God just showed them when they were studying their Bible? or something someone said on a favorite television program? or how great their favorite sports team played on the weekend? What are Christians thinking about most of the time? Is it about God or this world?

One of the most disturbing things I've seen in recent years is how liberal theology has leaked into conservative theology to the point where people on both sides are having substantial conversations to find those things that are common between them and not let what isn't common bother them. I know that the goal of unity in the Church is a good thing, but unity at the expense of obeying the Word of Truth is not what God had in mind.

Jesus prayed to His Father that those who would follow Him  
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would be “one as We are.” (John 17:11) In that same prayer, Jesus said, “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.” (John 17:17) The Apostle Paul wrote the Christians in Ephesus that his desire for them was to endeavor “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:3) Paul also told them that Jesus had given them apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip them for their service to God and to edify the Body of Christ “till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:13) In that same context, Paul also told the Ephesians – “that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ.” (Ephesians 4:14-15) The message of the Bible is clear – we must never cling to unity at the expense of Truth. Truth, if we follow it precisely as presented in the Bible, will always lead to unity among those who obey the Truth. For those who do not obey the Truth, unity is an ideal they will never be able to attain.

I’ve been a journalist since college and have spent most of my life observing people and reporting about what they think, say and do. It is my observation that Christians have less interest in God’s Word now than when God saved me from atheism 40 years ago. In just one generation, we have seen the

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commitment to Truth among Christians in our country collapse around us. Those of us who care can bemoan the fact that God's people have little interest in what He says in His Word – we can point our fingers and lay blame at many doorsteps – but that doesn't accomplish the one thing God wants His people to do and that is to hear what He has to say to them.

I'm going to share some truths about the Word of Truth that will hopefully help in rebuilding the confidence Christians should have in the Bible, the desire they should have in knowing it intimately, and the work of sharing its Truths to the world. To do that, we will look at the Word of Truth from two aspects. In this GraceLife Blog, we'll look at how to handle the Word of God correctly. In the [Faith Defense Blog](#), we'll look at the confidence we can have in the Bible that it is the Word of God and how to defend it powerfully. We need to develop two skills as a Church: (1) Defend the Word of Truth, (2) Rightly Divide the Word of Truth. That is the purpose and goal of our new studies.

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## Rightly Dividing

I pay close attention to what people say when they're in life-changing situations. As a journalist I've interviewed people in every imaginable situation of life. Training and experience help journalists pick the best quotes or "sound bites" for stories. We seek the truth expressed authentically. We recognize when people are saying something that needs to be heard and repeated.

"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 2:15

When I first read that verse soon after being saved, I knew I was reading something that needed to be heard and repeated. The Apostle Paul was writing what would most likely be his last letter on earth to someone he loved and cared about deeply. Timothy had ministered with Paul for many years. Paul was soon going to die for his faith in Christ and knew that Timothy would need strength and wisdom to continue the ministry without Paul. Timothy shared the oversight of churches with Paul and would have a lot of tough challenges ahead, so Paul wrote both of his letters to Timothy with that in mind.

Paul wrote Timothy that he needed to "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" and "endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." (2 Timothy 2:1-3) Paul also told Timothy that

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“the things you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” He told Timothy to “remind” God’s people about everything Paul had told them, “charging them before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers.” (2 Timothy 2:14) Then Paul told Timothy to “be diligent” to present himself “approved” to God, a “worker” who does not need to be ashamed, “rightly dividing the word of truth.” Here’s Paul, nearing the end of his ministry on earth, about to die for his faith, telling Timothy how to present himself to God and how to work in a way that will not bring shame on his ministry.

What does it mean to “rightly divide” the Word of Truth? Why would a Bible student need to “divide” the Bible? The Greek word translated “rightly divide” is *orthotomeo* – “to cut straight.” It was used in the ancient world of trade (“worker”) as cutting something in a straight, proper, correct way. The word was also used for “handling” something in a correct manner. English translators have used several terms in attempting to explain the ancient meaning – correctly handles, correctly explains, accurately handling, handling with precision, teach correctly, handling aright, rightly handling, properly handling.

The Bible is the True Word of God. Those who use God’s Word in ministry should handle, explain, and teach the Bible with the greatest care – that of a master craftsman. God’s Word deserves the kind of devotion reserved for the most

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precious of all things. We are blessed to have in our homes and in our hands the eternal Word of Truth. There are many who treat the Bible as if it has little or no value to shape life and transform souls for God. There are others who pervert the Word of God and wrongly divide the Truths in it. The way they handle God's Word is to "cut crooked" His Truths. We should not be among them. We should present ourselves to God as servant workers who care deeply for what's important to Him and "rightly divide" the Word of Truth.

"Rightly dividing the Word of Truth" means to handle the Word of God correctly – to cut it straight like a master craftsman. The process of being able to do that begins much like learning a highly skilled trade. First, a person must have a desire to learn the trade. Second, a master craftsman invites someone to apprentice with him or her. After a period of training, the apprentice becomes a journeyman, which means they have enough knowledge and ability in the craft to work on their own while continuing to learn more about the craft from the master craftsman. After years gaining experience as a journeyman, they earn the right to become a master craftsman and take on their own apprentices.

Jesus is the High Master. He chose 12 men to follow Him and learn of Him. They went through the process of being apprentices and journeymen, and most eventually became master craftsmen. The same is true of the Apostle Paul. Jesus chose Paul for the skill of apostleship and trained him over a

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period of many years. Paul went from being an apprentice to a journeyman and eventually a master craftsman under the High Master, Jesus. As was the process then and now, Paul chose men to follow him and learn the skilled work of Christian ministry. One of those men, Timothy, began with Paul when he was a teenager, which was a traditional time for young people to begin learning a trade from a master craftsman. We see Timothy traveling with Paul in the Book of Acts (beginning with Chapter 16), learning how to serve Christ and minister in His Name. We later see Timothy traveling on his own to minister and getting back with Paul for feedback and more training. Finally, in 2 Timothy, we see Paul give instructions to Timothy about what it means to be a master craftsman in Christian ministry. Paul is about to die and go to Heaven and he shares his final thoughts and directions for Timothy.

The Word of Truth is what God says. Paul wanted Timothy to handle what God said correctly. The idea of “rightly dividing” means there is a “wrongly dividing.” Many people handle what God says incorrectly. Paul knew that Timothy had genuine faith and was gifted by God for teaching and preaching the Word of Truth (2 Timothy 1:3-7). Paul had been the model of sincere ministry for Timothy and wanted the young preacher to stay true to what he had learned (2 Timothy 1:13-14). Paul knew Timothy would face lots of opposition in his ministry and reminded him of the importance of patiently teaching the rightly divided Word of Truth in hopes that God would grant

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them repentance so they might know the Truth (2 Timothy 2:20-26).

Timothy would face all kinds of people in his ministry; many with bad intentions who would be “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (2 Timothy 3:1-7) Evil men and impostors would grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. What would Timothy need to do to face these many challenges? It’s simple – what he already knew to do.

“But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” 2 Timothy 3:13-17

Knowing the Word of Truth, being able to rightly divide the Word of Truth, and understanding how the Spirit of God works with the Word of Truth is how the man of God becomes complete and thoroughly equipped for every good work. That’s when he can do this –

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“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” 2 Timothy 4:2-5

Apprenticeship for rightly dividing the Word of Truth begins when God chooses you.

“For many are called, but few are chosen.” Matthew 22:14

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love.” Ephesians 1:3-4

“But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14

Salvation means apprenticeship to everything Christ teaches:

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“... teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:20) It means growing in our knowledge and understanding of Christ: “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe.” (Ephesians 1:17-19)

Every Christian is an apprentice to Jesus Christ. Learning how to rightly divide the Word of Truth is foundational to our training. “I have given them Your word ... Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.” (John 17:14,17) The verb “sanctify” (hagioson) means “to set apart for holy use, sacred service.” Jesus knew that what would set His disciples apart from everything worldly and unholy would be the Holy Spirit using the Holy Word in their lives.

What does it mean to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ who rightly divides the Word of Truth? Jesus called His disciples personally and they followed Him and learned of Him. The Apostle Paul preached God’s Word and told those who believed that they followed both him and the Lord: “And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe.” (1 Thessalonians 1:6-7) Paul even went so far as to say

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that believers should follow his teachings and his life: “But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured.” (2 Timothy 3:10-11) That’s what a master craftsman should be able to say to apprentices and journeymen.

The first lesson we learn as followers of Christ is the importance of God’s Word to our apprenticeship. It is vital, central, and foundational to everything we believe and do. What did Jesus do when Satan tempted Him in the desert? He quoted the Word. Here are the Lord’s responses from Matthew 4.

- “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”
- “You shall not tempt the LORD your God.”
- “You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.”

When I first read that years ago, I remember thinking that if the Son of God relied on His Word to deal with Satan, I needed to rely on it even more. That means knowing it. I can’t use something I don’t know and I can’t use it correctly unless I learn how to rightly divide it. Think of the Word of God as a Holy Tool in our hands. God gave us His Spirit and His Word

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to make a difference in our world. Learning how to divide the Bible correctly is important to our ability to do that.

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## Observe In Context

Has anyone ever taken what you said or wrote out of context? How did that make you feel? Did you want to set the record straight? It's happened to me many times through the years as reporters interviewed me for different stories. Since I am also a journalist, I was sensitive to how they handled my information and quotes. I learned first hand what it's like to be misquoted and have information I shared with the reporter be taken out of context. That led to people misunderstanding my thoughts about issues or events. Even though what I told the reporters was the truth, taking my comments out of context gave a false impression of what I believed and had said.

People do that with the Bible all the time. They misrepresent what God says by taking His Words out of context, which leaves a false impression about Him and what He thinks, feels, and wants. Rightly dividing the Word of Truth begins with contextual study techniques. It takes time and effort, but the results are worth it when we understand what God is really saying. That is how we become “a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15)

### Contextual Study Techniques

1. Pray that God will guide your mind and heart as you study

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His Word. “Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving; meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains, that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak.” (Colossians 4:2-4)

2. Start at the beginning. If you’re studying the Book of Romans, begin by reading the first sentence – Romans 1:1-4. Don’t try to understand the meaning of a statement until you’ve studied everything leading up to it. You may have a strong interest in understanding what Romans 9:13 means, (“As it is written, ‘Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.’”), but trying to interpret it out of context can lead to many wrong ideas about what God means. If you rightly divide the Word of Truth beginning at Romans 1:1, you will be able to rightly divide Romans 9:13.

3. Look at each word in every sentence, carefully – “Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.” That’s almost 70 words, which is a long sentence. It will take a lot of study to fully understand the amazing Truth you’re reading.

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4. Write down all your observations before trying to interpret what you're reading.

The letter begins with the name Paul. Paul is the only person mentioned in this first sentence. Paul is a bondservant of Jesus Christ. Paul was called to be an apostle. Paul was separated to the gospel of God. God promised the gospel through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures. The gospel concerns God's Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is our Lord. Paul used the name Jesus Christ twice in this first sentence. Paul added the title "our Lord" in the second usage of His Name. Paul wrote that Jesus Christ was born of the seed of David according to the flesh. Jesus was declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness and by the resurrection from the dead. This sentence is almost 70 words in length.

This is similar to what I learned during my first few years as a journalist. I needed to cover every story by seeing everything that could be seen and writing down everything I could write down and capture on tape and film. I learned that I had to be careful about coming to conclusions before carefully seeing everything I could possibly see and asking as many questions as I could possibly ask. Only after I had done my work as a journalist could I report with certainty what was true about a story.

It is similar with Bible study. If you rush or skip the observation phase of Bible study, if you don't write down

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everything you see, if you don't ask all the right questions for interpretation, you will miss keys to understanding the great Truths God has built into His Word. Observation is the first step to "rightly dividing" the Word of Truth.

Here's a quick review of what we learned so far.

1. Pray that God will guide your mind and heart as you study His Word.
2. Start at the beginning.
3. Look at each word in every sentence, carefully.
4. Write down all your observations before trying to interpret what you're reading.

Now, to the interpretation of what you've read using Romans 1:1-4 as an example.

"Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead."

5. Ask insightful questions for interpretation. Careful

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observation of Romans 1:1-4 should raise many questions. Here are some interpretive questions from verse 1.

Who is Paul?

What language did he use to write this letter?

Why did he start his letter with just his name? Did he have a last name?

Didn't I read somewhere else that Paul's name was Saul? Why did he use Paul instead of Saul in this letter?

Was that the usual way people opened their personal letters centuries ago?

Did Paul do that in his other letters? If not, why not?

Is there anything significant about his using just his first name to start the letter?

What does the word "bondservant" mean in the language Paul used to write this letter?

Is there anything special about Paul using that word instead of other words that are translated "bondservant?" If so, what's special about it?

What was a bondservant's relationship to the people they served?

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What does it mean to be a “bondservant” of Jesus Christ?

Is being a bondservant of Christ a good thing?

Does Jesus want everyone to be a bondservant or just Paul?

Did Paul always begin his letters by identifying himself as a bondservant? If so, why? If not, why not?

Why did Paul use both of the Lord’s names at the beginning of the letter – Jesus Christ? Why not use just one of them?

What does the word “called” mean in the language Paul used to write his letter?

Is there anything special about Paul using that word instead of other words that are translated “called?”

Did the word hold any special meaning for people who received Paul’s letter?

What does the word “apostle” mean in the language Paul used to write his letter?

Is there anything special about Paul using that word instead of other words that are translated “apostle?”

Did the word hold any special meaning for the people who received Paul’s letter?

If so, what was the meaning?

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When did Paul become an apostle?

Did Paul always begin his letters by identifying himself as an apostle?

If so, what's significant about that?

Was Paul the only apostle mentioned in the Bible?

If not, is there anything different about Paul's apostleship compared to other apostles?

What does the word "separated" mean in the language Paul used to write his letter?

Is there anything special about Paul using that word instead of other words that are translated "separated?"

Did the word hold any special meaning for the people who received Paul's letter?

What does the word "gospel" mean in the language Paul used to write his letter?

Is there anything special about Paul using that word instead of other words that are translated "gospel?"

Did the word hold any special meaning for the people who received Paul's letter?

If so, what was the meaning?

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What is the “gospel of God?”

Is that gospel different than other gospels in the Bible?

What does it mean to be “separated to the gospel of God?”

We could ask many more questions from Romans 1:1, but these give us a good place to begin our interpretation of God’s Word.

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## Accurate Interpretation

Who inspired the Apostle Paul to write the Letters included as Scripture in the New Testament? That's right – the Holy Spirit did. When Paul told Timothy, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth,” he was writing what the Holy Spirit told him to write (2 Timothy 2:15). It is the Holy Spirit saying to us, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” The Spirit of God wants us to be diligent to present ourselves approved to God. He wants us to present ourselves to God as a worker who does not need to be ashamed. The Spirit of God wants us to rightly divide the Word of Truth. Simple and direct. That's God's Will for us.

Rightly dividing means “cutting straight, handling correctly,” God's Word. We start the straight cutting by reading every Book of the Bible from the beginning (e.g. Genesis 1:1; Luke 1:1; Romans 1:1). Our concern is accurate exegesis (critical explanation or interpretation of a text). We study the Word of Truth in context (the parts of something written or spoken that immediately precede and follow a word or passage and clarify its meaning). Would we read an important letter from a friend or family member by starting somewhere in the middle or toward the end? Not if we wanted to understand the purpose and intent of the writer. The same is true with the Bible. We

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start at the beginning and read it carefully all the way to the end. As we are reading the Bible in context, we observe everything. We take notes about everything we see. Then we ask questions about what we see. Answering those questions will lead us to begin the process of interpreting the meaning of the words we've read.

Many years ago I heard someone say that every verse of the Bible can be interpreted in many ways – as many ways as there are people who read it. Does that make sense to you? Did the Holy Spirit inspire the writing of the Bible for the purpose of everyone coming up with their own individual truths? If I say to you, “the building across the street is on fire,” how many ways can my words be interpreted? If I say the same words to 20 people who are standing nearby, could they come up with 20 different interpretations of the meaning of “the building across the street is on fire?” Can anyone believe my words mean something other than the fact that the building across the street is on fire? Can someone interpret it as “the building across the street is not on fire?” Can another person interpret my words as “the building across the street used to be on fire, but that happened a long time ago?” Can someone else interpret my words as “the building across the street may one day be on fire, but it is not on fire today?” I think not. I was quite clear – “the building across the street is on fire.”

Here's an example from the New Testament. Matthew wrote this in his Gospel account – “From that time Jesus began to

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show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.” (Matthew 16:21)

How many different interpretations of this verse can we have if we rightly divide the Word of Truth? What I see is that beginning at that time Jesus told His disciples that He had to go to Jerusalem, had to suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, had to be killed, and had to be raised the third day. Can we interpret this verse to mean that John the Baptist began to show to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and die at the hands of the elders and priests and scribes? Can we interpret the verse to mean that Jesus told some strangers that He was traveling to Nazareth? Can we interpret the verse to mean that Jesus told His disciples that He was going to Jerusalem to meet with elders and chief priests about opening a restaurant? Can we interpret the verse to mean that Jesus told some priests He was going to Bethel to die at the hands of His disciples? Can we interpret the verse to mean that Jesus told His disciples He was going to Jerusalem to join with the elders and chief priests and scribes to get their advice about how best to bring in the Kingdom? Can we interpret the verse to mean that Jesus told His disciples He was going to Jerusalem to fake His death and then start a family with Mary Magdalene? Can we interpret the verse to mean that Jesus told His disciples He was going to Jerusalem to die from pneumonia and remain in the grave? Of course not. All of those

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interpretations are ridiculous because the meaning of the verse is clear. Jesus told His disciples that He “must” go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.

Why can't we do that with every verse in the Bible? You think it's impossible? Then why does God tell us to rightly divide the Word of Truth? Why does God tell us to be workers who do not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth, if that's not possible? You think it's hard to rightly divide the Word of Truth? It is. That's why the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to use the word “worker” (ergates - laborer). The word was used for people who were hired to work outside all day long, especially those who labored in the fields. Yes, rightly dividing the Word of Truth is hard work. It's also rewarding. God rewards those who labor for Him with His approval. Most importantly, it brings glory to God!

The Church began to have problems with interpretation early in its history. The Apostle Paul wrote several letters to individual churches during the middle of the 1st century AD to address wrong interpretation and disobedience to God's revealed Truth. Jesus told the Apostle John to write letters to seven churches at the end of the 1st century AD to address wrong interpretation and disobedience to God's revealed Truth. Major disagreements about interpreting the Bible eventually divided the Church into many splinter pieces during the early centuries of Christianity until we now have thousands

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of divisions (denominations) and most Christians struggle to understand how to do something God told us was vital to our spiritual health – rightly divide the Word of Truth.

What if true followers of Christ around the world made right division of the Word the priority in their lives? What if we worked hard, as Paul asked us to do in 2 Timothy 2:15, and became very good at interpreting God’s Word correctly? What do you think might happen in the Church if Christians understood and obeyed the Truth of God’s Word? What if the Church reversed the divisions of the last 2,000 years and came together to fulfill the Lord’s prayer for us – “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.” (John 17:20-21) Can you imagine the joy in Heaven and on earth if the Church was united again around the Word of God? What a powerful force we would be for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The first phase of methodical, inductive Bible study is to carefully observe everything in a passage of Scripture. The second phase is interpretation. As we’ve seen in previous studies, the bridge between observation and interpretation is questions for interpretation. The questions we ask are based on our observations of terms, structure, general literary forms, and atmosphere (Methodical Bible Study, p. 97, Dr. Robert Traina, 1952). When I was first learning how to interpret Scripture, I

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used a simple chart that had observations on the left half of a piece of paper and questions for interpretation on the right half. It helped me to see what I was “seeing.”

**Important! Don't make interpretations during the observation and interpretive question phases of your study. Be patient and wait until you have seen, asked and answered – then you can interpret.**

Most Christians don't see themselves as interpreters of Scripture, but they are. Even if they allow someone else to do the interpreting for them (e.g. pastor, teacher, evangelist, prophet, missionary), they have still interpreted Scripture by believing what they were taught. The process of “rightly dividing the Word of Truth” is personal interpretation of Scripture. Some Christians have told me that is a dangerous proposition because we'd never have agreement on anything in the Bible if every Christian came up with their own interpretation, but I think the opposite is true. The Holy Spirit inspired the writing of Scripture and knows the meaning for every word and verse in the Bible. I believe He wants all of us to know that meaning and has given us the way to accomplish it.

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## Steps to Accurate Interpretation

The process of accurate interpretation of Scripture is to hear from the Holy Spirit throughout your study. Talk with the Spirit Who lives in you as you begin your time of study and share your thoughts and ideas with Him as you read every word. Ask Him to help you during the observation phase to see everything fully and clearly. Ask Him to help you ask the right questions that will lead to the right answers that will lead you to the right interpretation of every verse of the Scripture the Spirit inspired. He will bring incredible light into your study and you will literally hear from Him. Some of the most exciting moments in my life have been when God's Spirit taught me personally. I can't imagine a better Teacher.

Interpretation begins with defining terms. God blessed me in my first year as a Christian with teachers who were proficient in Hebrew and Greek. Studying with them from the original languages of the Bible gave me a desire to learn how to do that myself. If you can, study with someone who knows Hebrew and Greek or take classes at a local Bible college or online. If you're not able to study the languages, there are many online Hebrew and Greek websites you can use to learn more about specific terms in Scripture. Here are a few you may find helpful:

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## [Strong's Concordance with Hebrew and Greek Lexicon](#)

### [Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon](#)

### [New Testament Greek Lexicon](#)

I began studying Greek and Hebrew long before the Internet was available to the public. I slowly purchased lexicons and dictionaries that have helped me define terms through the years. I still use them and prefer them to the online versions. You may eventually want to build your own library of study aids.

I do not recommend you read commentaries about the Bible until you have completed your own interpretation. After you have heard from God's Spirit and know why you believe what you believe, reading commentaries by other Bible students may add to your understanding. However, if you read commentaries before the Spirit guides you to His interpretation, you may be misled by someone's wrong interpretation. The more you practice your interpretive skills, you will find your ability to rightly divide the Word of Truth improve. You will also be able to identify commentaries worth your time and those that aren't.

## Inductive or Deductive?

In the previous chapters we looked at the importance of hearing from the Holy Spirit through the process of observing and interpreting the Scripture He Inspired. Our work as interpreters of God's Word (rightly dividing) is to discover what the Holy Spirit is saying, not what we want a passage of Scripture to say. That's the difference between inductive and deductive study techniques. Inductive study begins with specifics and moves to the larger perspective, while deductive study begins with the larger perspective and moved to specifics. If we start with a general premise and try to prove that premise through specifics we discover, that is deductive study. If we start with specifics and allow those specifics to add with other specifics until we see the the larger perspective, the general premise will reveal itself from the specifics.

Another way of looking at the process is that inductive study is bottom-up, while deductive study is top-down. Deductive study moves from theory to hypothesis to observation to confirmation. Inductive study moves from observation to pattern to tentative hypothesis to conclusion and application. In inductive study we don't make an interpretation until we finish the process of observation. We also shared about not reading commentaries with other people's interpretations until we finish our own. It's important that we hear from the Holy Spirit first. He will always guide us into all Truth.

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“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you.” John 16:12-15

We also looked at the importance of defining terms. Having the wrong understanding of a word or phrase can lead to the wrong interpretation of an entire passage of Scripture. That's where good dictionaries and lexicons guide us to the true understanding of a word's meaning. Understanding how the grammar of Hebrew and Greek affects definition within particular usage is also important to understand. Many good books about grammatical rules for the languages are available to study in English.

## Step One of Interpretation

Ask questions. Interpretive questions come from your observations. If you are thorough in observing everything in a portion of Scripture, then lots of important questions will arise. The process of asking questions from your observations will sometimes send you back to the Word to observe again, which can lead to more discoveries.

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Think of the Bible as God's Letter of Love and Self-Revelation. He makes it clear from the beginning to the end of the Bible that He loves people. He Created them, Redeems them, and Protects them for eternity. How would you read a letter from someone you loved deeply and wanted to know more intimately? Would you read it casually and quickly and toss it to the side? Of course not. You would pour over every word, not wanting to miss any deeper meaning that might be in it. You would read it again and again, thinking how wonderful it was that the one you loved so deeply would share their deepest emotions with you. You would probably have many questions to ask this special person in your life and would ask them in a response letter, looking forward to receiving their answers. It's the same with God's Word, except at a much higher and more important level.

Your questions for interpretation of passages of Scripture begin with what makes up a sentence (components of a passage – terms, forms, structure, atmosphere) and move to understanding the meaning of the passage. From a journalistic perspective, it's the old "who, what, where, how, and why" questions. Who' involved? What are they saying? Where did they say it? How did they say it? Why did they say it. Have you ever noticed that some reporters give you more and better information from covering the same story that many other reporters also covered? They all covered the same story, but usually one reporter's story stands out as being thorough and

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complete. We want to be that kind of reporter in our study of God's Word – thorough and accurate.

The first course I studied in Bible college was hermeneutics (Methodical Bible Study). It was a mandatory course that lasted two semesters and had to be completed before students could proceed to other study areas – a wise decision by the college. It prepared students for everything else that would come during their education. I was a relatively young Christian, having recently come out of atheism, so I needed to understand the hard work that would be necessary to spend the rest of my life rightly dividing the Word of Truth. Methodical-inductive Bible study takes a tremendous amount of time and discipline, but the results are beyond explanation. It's so important that we know why we believe something and be able to explain that to someone else so they can understand it and apply the Truth of God's Word to their life.

## Step Two of Interpretation

The second step of interpretation is finding answers and reasons for the questions we've asked. You've chosen a portion of Scripture to study, preferably at the beginning of a Book of the Bible (e.g. Mark 1:1; Romans 1:1). You've carefully looked at everything in the verse(s) and written all of your observations. You've looked at all your observations and asked every question you can think of that needs to be answered.

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## Questions to Ask

Terms – the definition of each word ... the significance of the grammatical structure

Form – the literary form used by the writer (e.g. history, poetry, parable, psalm, proverb)

Tone – the atmospheric tone used by the writer (e.g. joyful, sad, serious, urgent)

Rationale – the why questions

## Answering Questions

It's important to remember the spiritual aspect of Bible study -

“But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually

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discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For ‘who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?’ But we have the mind of Christ.” 1 Corinthians 2:10-16

We need to remember that the writing of the Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit of God. He searches all things, including the deep things of God. Isn't that what we want to know from studying the Bible – the “deep things” of God? Paul taught and wrote those things the Holy Spirit taught him, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. The work of rightly dividing the Word of Truth is not a natural thing to do and it is something the natural man cannot do. Only spiritual can interpret spiritual.

When we study spiritually – attuned to the leading of the Holy Spirit – we will find that Truth is often obvious. God is not trying to trick or fool people. God Speaks openly and clearly. The correct interpretation of a passage of Scripture is usually the obvious interpretation. You might call it “spiritual common sense.”

Because we are human beings and the people who the Holy Spirit inspired to write the Bible were human beings, we can understand the meaning of Scripture from a human as well as Divine perspective. Writers like Mark, Luke, Peter and Paul gave readers their human perspective of Truth even as they shared God's View. We learn so much through their human

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experiences. We understand what it's like to be human and filled with joy or overcome by grief. It is more difficult to understand what it's like to be God, so God sent His Only Son Who became both human and Divine to die for our sins and help us bridge the gap in understanding the "deep things of God." As John reminds us – "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) Jesus Christ is the Word of God – "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." (John 1:1-4)

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## Objective Study Methods

We've seen that some of the subjective methods of Bible study include spiritual sense, common sense, and human experience. This is where many Christians stop in their study of God's Word and one of the reasons we find so many different interpretations of the same verses within the Church. Subjective study methods are those that are based on or influenced by an individual's personal feelings and opinions.

Objective Bible study methods, on the other hand, are not based on personal feelings or opinions in considering the facts before them. Rightly dividing the Word of Truth combines both subjective and objective study methods to be sure our feelings and opinions are based on the Truth. Objective study methods are honestly more time consuming and more difficult than subjective methods – but the results are definitely worth it.

We've looked at the importance of defining terms, so let me add a couple of thoughts about that aspect of interpreting Scripture. The Holy Spirit inspired the human authors of the Bible to use specific Hebrew and Greek words to communicate meaning. In order to understand that meaning, we need to understand the meaning of the individual words and their usage in Scripture. Words have a root meaning and it's helpful to understand the root meaning and how it was used and

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understood by ancient people. Good Bible dictionaries and lexicons are helpful in understanding the roots of words used in the Bible.

I've often heard that English is a difficult second language for many people around the world to learn because the same word can mean different things depending on usage. For instance, the word cool. "It is a cool day." "He is such a cool guy." "What you did was not cool, dude." "Cool it, man! That's not cool." Someone who's mother tongue is a language other than English might find it strange that we use the word "cool" in so many different ways. In order for them to understand the meaning of the word cool, they have to learn about usage in the English language.

Hebrew and Greek are more exact languages than English in many ways. For instance, the word love. Hebrew and Greek each have several words that are translated by the English word "love". The love may be that of a parent for a child, child for a parent, husband for a wife, person for a pet, brother for a brother, friend for a friend, God for people, people for God. Knowing which Hebrew or Greek word the human author of Scripture used in a verse helps us understand the true meaning and purpose.

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## Integrating and Summarizing

Once you've answered your questions, you need to integrate the answers to arrive at the main message of the Scripture you're studying. That main message is the meaning the Holy Spirit purposed when He inspired the writing of what you are reading. If you've done a good job of rightly dividing the Word of Truth, you're ready to prepare your interpretation for the next step. Even as you've written your observations, questions, and answers, I suggest you write a summary statement about what you conclude from integrating your answers. A good way to do that is present it as a research paper you might give to a professor for a grade. Include a title and simple outline. You might also include a premise and conclusion to the outline. Remember, this is just for you – for now. The purpose of integrating and summarizing your hard work of rightly dividing the Word of Truth is to see what you discovered and prepare you for the next step. Other ways to integrate and summarize your interpretation are paraphrase and essay. Those might even fit your thought process better than a research paper. Your essay could include the process you followed to get to the interpretation.

Be careful when integrating and summarizing answers not to fall into common traps that some interpreters fall into. Every denominational group has a different way of interpreting some portions of the Bible. Remember, Jesus prayed to His Father

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for unity among His disciples. The Holy Spirit speaks what He hears from Christ. God's Message to His children is not many messages – it's one message – if it's "rightly divided". That means some of the different denominational interpretations are not correct. We want our interpretation to be right, so we work hard to rightly divide the Word of Truth.

## Evaluation

Congratulations! You've done a great job interpreting Scripture. You are well on your way to "rightly dividing the Word of Truth." So, what's next? Evaluate the value of your interpretation, Apply it to your life, and Correlate it properly with other portions of the Word of Truth.

To evaluate is to determine the worth of something. We know that the Bible has inestimable value in part and as a whole, but how do we determine the value of our interpretation of God's Word? We know that "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work," but is all Scripture addressed to us today?

God told Abraham to circumcise every male child as a sign of the covenant between them. Any male child who was not circumcised would be cut off from his people because he broke the covenant with God. (Genesis 17:9-14) How do we reconcile that direct and clear command with the Apostle Paul's declaration to Gentile believers that if they became circumcised "Christ will profit you nothing." (Galatians 5:2) Paul added that every man who became circumcised was a "debtor to keep the whole law" and had become estranged from Christ - "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor

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uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.” (Galatians 5:6) Even though you can correctly interpret each portion of Scripture (Genesis 17 and Galatians 5) correctly, you won’t understand its worth to your life until you evaluate it for application. Which will it be? Circumcision or uncircumcision?

Look at the Scriptures you’ve interpreted and ask yourself this important question – “does this have any value for people today?” If you don’t find value in what you’ve interpreted, then you need to ask why to make sure there are no holes in your interpretation. If what you’ve interpreted truly has no value for today, then you don’t need to proceed to the application phase of Bible study. However, 40 years of studying God’s Word have taught me that every part of the Bible has value for my life. As Paul wrote, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” All Scripture – not just some of it – all of it.

Since the Bible does have great value for our lives today, I need to seek God’s help to understand its worth to my life and people in my life. Even though circumcision is not something Christians should do today for spiritual purposes, there is great value in circumcision from the time of Abraham to the time of Christ. Knowing that value and the deep spiritual purpose behind it will help us understand God at new depths and increase our appreciation for His wonderful plan for Israel.

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## Application & Correlation

The process of application is to take the proper evaluation of correctly interpreted portions of God's Word and apply them to our life. It is never enough to just "know" the Truth. We must "do" the Truth. As Jesus asked the crowds of people that followed Him – "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46) Application is the process of obedience to God. That obedience must follow proper context and right division of the Word of Truth, but it must follow! Bible study without application is a great waste of the breath God has given us. The Church has wasted much breath through the centuries.

**Application** is the great purpose of Bible study. God inspired the Writing of the Bible so that people would live according to His Truth. As Jesus told Satan – "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.'" (Luke 4:4)

**Correlating** Scripture is what we are able to do well after finishing the process of observing, interpreting, evaluating, and applying God's Truth to our lives. Correlation is the process of establishing relationships and connections between and among various portions of Scripture. We learn how to do it properly by seeing how Jesus, Paul, Peter, John and other apostolic writers made correlations from Old Testament passages. As I see them "model" the process of applying Truth from the Old

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Testament to life, I learn how to do that with the both the Old and New Testament.

It is from the process of correlating Scriptures that “topical” studies form. It is from correlation that we are able to develop character and theological studies. Knowing that we understand how to “rightly divide the Word of Truth” so that we are using every passage properly during correlation gives us great comfort in knowing we are handling the Truth as God would have us do – “a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15)

Rightly dividing the Word of Truth is not easy. It takes time, effort, prayer, and a spiritual ear to hear what the Spirit says about why He inspired what we read in the Bible. That’s why Paul told Timothy he would be “a worker.” Rightly dividing the Word of Truth takes work, and yields a great harvest of Truth that will change your life and the lives of many who hear you.

Our prayers are with you as you study God’s Word methodically, inductively, rightly!

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