Rule 4: Rightly Divide

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Hermeneutics: How to Read and Understand the Bible

RULE #4: Rightly Divide Scripture.

I. Scripture's words and concepts require frequent division into different senses (II Tim 2:15).
   A. The Bible must be divided for right understanding, or this instruction would not be here.
      1. Unless the Bible has divisions and needs divisions, this rule would not be given.
      2. God has made the divisions, so the man of God must find them for His approval.
      3. Resentment of dividing and distinguishing of verses is ignorance or rebellion.
      4. Ministers must study as workmen – diligent labor – to divide the word rightly, for the classification of the same or similar words or concepts into different categories and meanings requires diligent and serious study.
      5. God will only approve a minister who studies hard to rightly divide the word.
      6. Ministers will be shamed in ignorance and confusion by not rightly dividing, for without right distinctions they will easily be seen to contradict other sections.
      7. The Bible is written with this degree of difficulty to confuse the proud and lost.
   B. **Divide.** To separate (a thing) into parts, or (a number or collective body) into smaller groups; to split up, cleave; to break or cut asunder. To separate into branches; to cause to ramify. To separate or mark out (a continuous whole) into parts (in fact, or in thought); to make to consist of parts, or to distinguish the parts of. To separate into classes; to distinguish the kinds of; to class, classify. Formerly, in scholastic use, To draw distinctions with regard to; also *absolutely*: = [**Distinguish.** To make a distinction in or with respect to; *esp.*, in scholastic use, to draw distinctions between various meanings of (a word or statement); hence, to do *away*, or *out of*, bring *into* (something) by making subtle distinctions. To make or draw a distinction; to perceive or note the difference between things; to exercise discernment; to discriminate.] To make separation or distinction (*between*). To make distinctions, as in logic.

II. Consider other scriptural instructions of this dividing of words and concepts being practiced.
   A. The law of God provided for priests or judges to resolve controversies (Deut 17:8-13).
   B. Jehoshaphat warned his judges to be prepared for such divisions (II Chron 19:8-11).
   C. When Ezra and the Levites taught the Scriptures, they gave the sense that was not easily identified by mere reading and hearing (Neh 8:8).
      1. Deuteronomy 22:5 does not prohibit a woman wearing pants, but it does prohibit the cross-dressing of perverts, transvestism, lascivious sexual experimentation, and gender twisting parties and role playing (Lev 18:22-30; I Cor 6:9).
      2. Deuteronomy 24:5 does not require a one year honeymoon at home without working, but it

does require a husband to avoid business or military trips away from his new bride, who was often the fearful result of an arranged marriage.

3. Proverbs 23:13 does not teach that beating a child has no risk of death or will give the child eternal life. You can save him from practical death (10:2; 11:4).
4. Proverbs 23:14 does not teach beating will save a child from the Lake of Fire.

D. When Jesus was on earth, he used many words and concepts in secondary senses.
   1. John 2:17-22 uses "temple" to refer to His body, not to their house of worship.
   2. John 4:4-15 does not teach a fountain of youth by "living water," but eternal life.
   3. John 9:2-3 does not teach the blind man and his parents had not sinned, but it rather teaches their sins were not the cause of his blindness.
   4. John 11:11-14 shows dividing the senses of "sleep" of rest and "sleep" of death.
   5. These examples could be multiplied indefinitely, once again showing the literal hermeneutic of dictionary worship to be contrary to Scripture and dangerous.

III. The application of this rule must consider its value, its limitations, and its possible abuses.
   A. The Bible often uses the same word or concept with more than one sense, and it is our duty to find those several different senses and classify all the related verses accordingly.
   B. If the same word or concept in different places seems to contradict one another, then cultivate the habit of classification of these verses into a reconciled system of divisions.
   C. When identical or similar statements or concepts confront the student in different contexts, an instinctive desire to consider different senses must be nurtured and applied.
   D. Every occurrence of a word or statement or concept should be considered, since an obvious different sense will encourage and help define the needed division(s).
   E. This rule teaches the importance of defining terms, which is essential to all knowledge.
   F. Restrain impulsive haste to make unnecessary divisions, but do not be afraid to divide.

IV. The illustration of this rule shows how it works to save us from heresy, confusion, and shame.
   A. Salvation must be divided into five phases or we end up in horrible, doctrinal confusion.
      1. Was Paul saved before the world began in God's purpose (II Timothy 1:9)?
      2. Or could he save himself by taking heed to himself and doctrine (I Tim 4:16)?
      3. Or was he saved by the washing of the Holy Spirit's regeneration (Titus 3:5)?
      4. Or was he saved when Christ Jesus came into the world in A.D. 30 (I Tim 1:15)?
      5. Or will he be saved when God glorifies him body, soul, and spirit (Rom 13:11)?
      6. Can we lose our salvation if we forget things we have been taught (I Cor 15:2)?
      7. These five distinctions can be multiplied indefinitely when classifying salvation.
      8. These five divisions are necessary for understanding the components of salvation i.e. adoption, sanctification, justification, regeneration, conversion, etc.
      9. The understanding or confusion, depending on whether you divide salvation or not, is enormous. We cannot rightly know our salvation without dividing it.

B. We divide Jesus Christ in two senses by the union of His two natures in One Person.
    1. Some verses refer to His humanity (Luke 2:52; 4:1-2; John 19:26,28; Acts 20:28; Gal 2:20; I Cor 15:28).
    2. Some verses refer to His divinity (John 3:13; 6:62; 8:56-58; Eph 3:9; Heb 1:2).
    3. Is Jesus Christ the Son of God by His incarnation or eternal generation? The difference is that between a begotten god and The Mighty God!

C. We divide "Israel" into at least three senses to discover God's changing dispensation.
    1. Some verses use Israel for physical Jews (Romans 9:27,31; 10:19,21).
    2. Some verses use Israel for spiritual Jews (Romans 10:1; Galatians 6:16).
    3. Some verses use Israel for elect Gentiles as spiritual Jews (Acts 15:14-18).
    4. This division is easier than some, since Scripture divides it (Rom 2:28-29; 9:6).

D. We divide temptation into at least two senses to avoid the obvious contradiction.
    1. God tempted Abraham by asking him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (Gen 22:1).
    2. Yet, God denied being tempted with evil or tempting any man (James 1:13).
    3. We must divide between the lust for evil of our own hearts (James 1:14-16), and the opportunity or occasion for that lust to act (Gen 22:2; I Cor 10:13).

E. We must divide the contradictory senses of justification spoken of by Paul and James.
    1. Martin Luther, by not studying enough, scorned James and cut it from his Bible; many others have thought of doing it, or they consciously ignore James.
    2. Paul is writing of our legal justification by Christ's righteousness (Romans 4:2).
    3. James is writing of practical justification, or the evidence of righteousness and the proof of faith by our own works (James 2:21).

F. We divide the marital recommendations of Paul for virgins and widows.
    1. The general rule is marriage's value (Gen 2:18; Ruth 3:1; Pr 18:22; I Tim 5:14).
    2. However, the distress at Corinth recommended against it (I Cor 7:25-26).
    3. If a widow could contain her fleshly desires and chose to serve God, she should do so in a single life dedicated to God (I Corinthians 7:39-40; I Timothy 5:9).

G. We divide the carefulness required and condemned in the saints of God.
    1. There is a carefulness that involves distraction and worry, which we are to carefully avoid (Luke 10:41; I Corinthians 7:32; Philippians 4:6).
    2. There is a carefulness that involves watchfulness and taking of pains in the performing of our duties, which we are to cultivate (I Cor 12:25; II Cor 7:11,12).

H. We distinguish the worshipful fear of God of saints and the slavish fear of His enemies.
    1. Fear seeking to please our glorious God is commended (Phil 2:12; Psalm 130:4).
    2. Fear that is servile terror of judgment is condemned (Gen 3:9-10; James 2:19).

I. We must divide the will of God we are to trust and that which we are to obey.
    1. God's secret will is His eternal purpose, which is certain (Rom 9:19; Jas 4:15).

2. God's revealed will is His written instructions for our conduct (I Thes 4:3; 5:18).
3. We have assistance with this division by the good words of Moses (Deut 29:29).

J. The Bible condemns swearing, yet the Lord and Paul both swore. We divide swearing.
1. The Bible says anything beyond yes and no is wrong (Matt 5:33-37; Jas 5:12).
2. The Lord, Paul, and an angel swore (Heb 6:13; 7:21; Rev 10:5-6; II Cor 1:23).
3. The Mennonites, JWs, and other denominations are confused and ashamed here.
4. God condemns frivolous swearing by wrong objects (Matt 23:16-22; Jer 4:2).

K. Romans 11 gives several fascinating and valuable divisions; consider just two of them.
A. In Romans 11:11, we must divide ***fall*** into falling entirely without recovery and falling temporarily with recovery. Here are two different senses in one verse!
B. We must divide ***casting away*** into two similar senses between Rom 11:1-2 and Rom 11:15!

L. We divide the two testaments, as they are two different covenants governing worship.
1. The use of musical instruments in the Old does not justify them in the New.
2. The use of incense and mitres in the Old does not justify them in the New.
3. Civil authority to enforce doctrine in the Old does not justify it in the New.

M. Is God the author of confusion? Yes (Gen 11:1-9), and no (I Cor 14:33)!

N. Does baptism wash away sins? Yes (Acts 22:16), and no (I Pet 3:21; Tit 3:5)! Baptism only washes away sins figuratively and symbolically to our consciences by immersion.

O. Does "water" in John 3:5 teach baptismal regeneration? No (John 4:14; 7:39; Tit 3:5)!

P. Paul implies three divisions in using wine – members, deacons, bishops (I Tim 3:3,8), which is a different way of using the Bible than presumptuously condemning any at all.

Q. Paul circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3), but he would not circumcise Titus (Gal 2:1-5); he soothed the Jews with the former and condemned the Judaizers with the latter.

R. Paul allowed Jewish holy days as a liberty, but not Christmas and Easter (Rom 14:5-6).

S. We apply the day-year principle in Daniel 7:25; we do not apply it in Daniel 8:14; we do apply it in Daniel 9:24; because the timeframes of the prophecies determine this division for us, by hindsight, when the prophecies assume their full value!

T. Did the Galatians actually fall from grace, as Campbellites teach (Gal 5:4)? Or did they fall from the proper understanding of grace, in the way they were justified by the law?

U. Does baptism cause church membership? Is it the door to the church? Of course not.
1. We know the natures of the things are different (I Pet 3:21; Ac 9:26; I Cor 5:13).
2. And we can read that Pentecostal baptisms did not cause membership (Ac 2:41).

V. A few divisions made by men where God has no division will illustrate the abuse of this rule.
A. Scofield and his followers chop human history into seven dispensations, when God only has three dispensations (Romans 5:14; Luke 16:16). This man wrote a book, Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth.
B. Scofield and his followers separate the kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God, when the two are identical, the kingdom of the God of heaven (Dan 2:44; Matt 19:23-24)!

C. Scofield and his followers divide the coming of Christ (for his saints) from the coming of the Lord (with his saints), to avoid the damnation of II Thess 2:1-3, when the Bible does not even hint at such a distinction (I Thess 4:13-17; II Thess 1:7-10; 2:1-3).

D. Billy Sunday and his followers, which are Legion, divide the Hebrew, Greek, and English words for wine in this way: if the passage commends it, then it must be unfermented grape juice; if the passage condemns it, then it must be alcoholic wine.
    1. Isn't that the most pitiful piece of circular reasoning and begging the question you have ever imagined? And these "touch not, taste not, handle not" Pharisees are often from the best schools, and they love to talk about their Semitic studies and expertise in two dead languages. Incredible!
    2. "Wine" has always and only meant fermented juice of the grape as an alcoholic beverage. See The Oxford English Dictionary!
    3. And the Bible does not allow such a division anywhere, for the same Hebrew and Greek words commended in one place make men drunk in other verses!

E. Stuart Custer and his Greek-worshipping followers, which are Legion, make a creative play on the English word "lovest" between Jesus and Peter (John 21:15-17).
    1. *Agape* and *phileo* are synonyms! Compare Heb 12:6 (*a*) and Rev 3:19 (*p*); John 3:35 (*a*) and 5:20 (*p*); I Cor 16:22 (*p*) and II Cor 5:14 (*a*); John 11:5 (*a*) and John 11:36 (*p*); and John 20:2 (*p*) and John 21:7 (*a*). Let God be true! Love = love!
    2. Jesus gently chastised Peter for three denials with His three questions (John 21:15-17; Matt 26:34; Mark 14:30; Luke 22:61; John 18:15-27).
    3. Peter felt the three questions, not the use of a word indicating a lesser form of love or affection, as is stated rather clearly (John 21:17).
    4. Why the harshness here? These Bible-denying scribes and disputers use this "illustration" to cast doubt on the English scriptures of zealous young converts.

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