

RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH

2 Timothy 2:15

We believe that the Holy Bible is divinely inspired; it is the most authoritative document on earth. The Old Testament scriptures were created as "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:21). The apostles of Jesus were special chosen vessels of God who taught the truth from the time they were filled with the Holy Ghost. Jesus had told them that after they received the Holy Ghost, He would bring to their remembrance everything He had spoken to them. Thus, they could record this for the Holy Scriptures. Paul, who was called later, was a prolific writer, especially teaching salvation by grace through faith and the transition from the Law to the Gospel. God, in His almighty providence, has preserved the Holy Scriptures through the ages for the salvation and edification of man.

Many religious people compare the Holy Scriptures with writings of learned men, who they imagine had, or have, a broader perspective of matters than the inspired writers of the Bible. Thus truth is reasoned away because they do not comprehend the difference between Holy Ghost inspiration and knowledge or education.

We cherish the historical writings of our church forefathers. They help us understand the scriptural truth the church has held through the ages. However, the forefathers' writings are not as authoritative as is the Bible. We should exercise care, especially in regards to an opinion written by an individual writer, even though we would feel such was a man of God. They, like we, grew in their understanding of the truth during their Christian lives, and therefore they may not have had a mature understanding at the time of their writing. An understanding witnessed by several church fathers over a period of years is more dependable than one that comes from one individual. We should especially be concerned that an explanation corresponds with the Word and bears the witness of the Holy Spirit.

We must beware that we do not search the Scriptures for a defense of our opinions and traditional understanding, but we need a prayerful, open spirit. Man is inclined to grasp for support in defense of what he would consider truth. The truth will stand on its own merits. Time and facts will erode man's superfluous arguments, but truth, though trodden down, will remain.

In man's effort to muster support for a certain position, quite often the Old Covenant is brought into focus. What cannot be substantiated with the New Testament is defended with the Old. On the other hand, there are those who have no use for the Old Testament because they do not understand how it relates to the New. Dirk Philip gives the following characteristic of true ministers: "...they rightly divide the word of God between the old and new testaments, between the letter and the Spirit ..." (Dietrich Philip Hand Book, p. 385).

Already during the apostles' time, there was trouble in the church in regards to dividing between the "letter" and the "Spirit." This is yet a subject of controversy and confusion. Jesus said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:17-19). Some take out of this passage that the Law, with varying exceptions, is still to be kept by Christians.

Jesus did not come to annul the Law or bring a new leniency. He fulfilled all the Law, not only the parts pertaining to sacrifices but every "jot and tittle." The quotation above must be understood in the light of the following passage in Hebrews: "For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth" (Hebrews 9:16-17). The Old Testament could not be replaced with the New until the Testator had died. Then it came into effect. Before Jesus, the Testator, died, it would have been wrong for anyone to teach that men were no longer under the Law.

In Hebrews 7:12, we read, "For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law." Christ is now the Heavenly High Priest; so the Law with all its types and shadows has given way to the New. But behind all this there is a merciful and righteous God who, from the beginning, had an unchangeable plan. Jesus fulfilled the righteousness commanded in the Law and took upon Himself the death sentence we deserved because we all have sinned and come short of His perfect righteousness. Through His grace, our sins can be forgiven, and by the power of the Holy Ghost, we can live a life of victory over sin's bondage.

Paul said in Romans 13:9-10, "For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

He also writes in Galatians: "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself ... Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh ... But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law" (Galatians 5:14,16,18). Jesus and Paul teach clearly that if we love God and our neighbor, we, by the power of the Holy Spirit, fulfill a holy God's righteousness.

The Ten Commandments, and many other Old Testament statutes, are a good code of ethics for man, especially for the unconverted. But the righteousness of the Holy Spirit-filled Christian surpasses the mere outward keeping of the Ten Commandments, because it sanctifies the soul from the inside out. "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:3-4). "For the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). Because of our fallen nature, giving man a commandment, even the threats of punishment for disobedience, cannot bring about holiness. Only when the Spirit comes into our being in the new birth can guilt be removed. The bondage of sin is thereby overcome, and the mystery of righteousness is fulfilled.

Galatians 3:10: "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them." If we accept a certain law, we also subject ourselves to its discipline or enforcement. Paul's statement corresponds with this principle: if we commit ourselves to keeping the Law, then we also come under its curse if we do not keep it in perfection, which no one can.

"Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come and to whom the promise was made ... Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that even the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe. But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith, which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster" (Galatians 3:19-25). "For by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). The law was the "ministration of condemnation" (2 Corinthians 3:6-9). It is by realizing the righteousness of a holy God that we recognize our sinfulness and come under conviction, thus seeing our hopelessness and need of a Redeemer. This working is an indispensable part of the new birth. Conviction can be brought about not only through the Law but also through the New Testament teaching, and by any other means God uses to reveal to He man his sinfulness and need of deliverance.

"Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good" (Romans 7:12). "Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned ... But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully; Knowing this that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners; for unholy and profane... and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine" (1 Timothy 1:5-10). The grace of Jesus Christ has not taken away the righteous judgments of God against sin and sin-

ners (unbelievers).

In the last two hundred years, various expositors have divided the Law of Moses into three parts: Ceremonial, Judicial, or Civil, and Moral. It is not known to this writer that any of the earlier historic church writers promoted this, though Dirk Phillips wrote an article explaining how the figurative parts of the Law are fulfilled in the new dispensation. Charles Buck, in *A Theological Dictionary* (1851), taught that the moral part of the Law is yet to be kept. Others take the position that it is all to be kept except the ceremonial part and that which Jesus changed in His teaching.

The Law of Moses is a unique combination of secular, civil, and spiritual government, all under the headship of God (a theocracy), with strict justice to be enforced (the man who was caught picking up sticks on the Sabbath was stoned—Numbers 15:32-36). Interwoven are shadows and types that point to the New Covenant. Problems arise in determining what is part of the moral law and is yet to be kept. Some say the Ten Commandments, while others include more. Some of the Old Testament commandments are a mixture of the civil and moral; some seem to be mainly figurative, pointing to the new and abiding truths of the gospel.

The fourth commandment, pertaining to the keeping of the Sabbath, is a primary example that has been the basis of much controversy. We believe it is good for man to use one day per week for special spiritual rejuvenation. And we have scriptural evidence that the early gentile Christians gathered on the first day of the week. However, we do not keep the Sabbath, and it is not known to this writer that any of the church forefathers taught that it should be kept. The Lord did not transfer the Old Testament Sabbath to Sunday. We believe, and the forefathers gave testimony to this, that the Sabbath was a shadow of the eternal rest. It is also a type of the rest a Christian has when he ceases from his own works and surrenders all to his Lord and Master (Hebrews 4:1-11).

In the old dispensation there were many special holy times and objects. The temple was a special holy dwelling place of God; the New Covenant temple is now the heart of a Christian. Holiness is no longer held to be in special times, places, and things but in the dedicated saints who live for their Master seven days a week. Paul wrote to the Colossians: "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days" (Colossians 2:16). Note that in the KJV days is italicized, indicating that the translators inserted this word. Most other versions do not have this word at the end of the verse. The New American version, for instance, reads thus: "Let no one, then, pass judgment on you in matters of food and drink or with regard to a festival or new moon or sabbath." And going on to verse 17: "These are shadows of things to come, the reality belongs to Christ." In the *Martyrs Mirror*, pages 435 and 436, is related the interrogation of four brethren and four sisters who gave their testimony on the keeping of Sunday and holidays. The reader is encouraged to read their testimony.

The moral principles of the Law certainly still stand and are fulfilled in the Spirit-led Christian. "Holiness becometh thine house, O Lord, for ever" (Psalm 93:5). But this holiness is not fulfilled from the basis of keeping the commandments but from the basis of love, which is a fruit of spirituality (the inner presence of the Holy Spirit). By focusing on the legal commandment rather than our devotion to God, we bring ourselves under the works of the Law and put the cart before the horse.

Part of the burden of this article is that we would not "frustrate the grace of God" (Galatians 2:21) with well-intentioned efforts to bring about good works with precepts from the Law. When we fail to maintain spirituality, there is a tendency that we substitute the crutch of statutes to bring about the needed righteousness. Although the many Old Testament precepts were a burden to keep, in a way it is still more desirable to the carnal man to keep commandments than to surrender to God. It provides a humanistic way to pacify one's self-righteous tendencies. There is simply no acceptable substitute for the Spirit-led life.

It is remarkable how the Old and New Testaments support each other. They mesh in a beautiful manner if correctly used. No other religion in the world has this wonderful basis. The New Testament should not give way to the Old, for the New Testament is now in authority. The apostle Paul, when

dealing with carnality and sin in the church (such as the man that had his father's wife-1 Corinthians 5), did not refer the Christians to the Old Testament precept where the particular sin was forbidden. But he always emphasized spiritual living. However, he repeatedly quoted the Old Testament scriptures and taught how they are fulfilled in the new covenant, and in one or more places he wrote in support of a gospel teaching, "as also saith the law." Many things in the Old Testament can be used as an enhancement of the New, but we should not base doctrine on Old Testament precepts.

There are many commandments in the Law that would fit under the umbrella of the two great commandments: loving God above all, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Deuteronomy 22:8 is one example: "When thou buildest a new house, then thou shalt make a battlement for thy roof, that thou bring no blood upon thine house, if any man fall from thence." This is an illustration of the concern we should have for our fellowman, but we do not base it on literally keeping that specific commandment. There are many commandments that help plant conviction against sin, such as the commandments against various immoral acts and the practice of necromancy. A person who is "born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him [with enlightenment and power]: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1John 3:9). We have life in Him, we love Him, and we want to please Him. Even when one has only the fear of God, there is already recognition of sin. And when we are possessed of the Holy Spirit, we know that immorality in its various forms is wrong. We possess a childlike, trusting faith and could not put confidence in someone who communicates with the dead or a fortune-teller, because it is against the gospel principle of trusting in the Lord and casting our cares upon Him.

When we notice that there is a lack of grace in our lives and only the prohibitions are keeping us from sin, it should alarm us. We are not where we ought to be. However, the standards of God's righteousness, however presented, have this benefit for us: when we are not spiritual, they show us our transgressions so that we can again draw near to God as sinners in need. Such people He came to save and deliver.

In Deuteronomy 22:28-29, it was commanded that if a man defiled a virgin, he should marry her and could never put her away. This is an example of a statute that is a mixture of civil and moral direction. In this case, as in many others, we must conclude that the Old Testament precepts teach moral and responsible living. But we believe this order is subordinate to New Testament principles of forgiveness and non-coercion, also proper church order, including excommunication and marrying in the Lord. In the same discourse (Deuteronomy 23:2), we have the statute that illegitimate children were barred from the congregation of the Lord until the tenth generation. While this teaches moral living and God's hatred for sin, it is far removed from the principles of the New Covenant. The New Testament is a redemptive gospel of healing and restoration, which would overshadow the Old Testament's "ministration of condemnation" (2 Corinthians 3:9).

In Acts 15, we find a record of what is sometimes called the first conference. In this meeting, the church leaders adopted this direction for the believers: "Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear ... For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication; from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well." Jacob the Chandler wrote on this passage from prison (*Martyrs Mirror*, p. 816):

... For the apostles always had a godly care for the simple, and sought to prevent division, as far as was possible for them; hence they tried every means to allay strife, as can clearly be seen in the Acts of the Apostles. For when the Jewish brethren came to trouble the believers among the Gentiles, saying: "Except ye be circumcised according to the law of Moses, ye cannot be saved;" so that there was a great uproar among the people, there rose up also at Jerusalem certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying that it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses; which was certainly great injudiciousness. Yet the elders and the apostles did not persist in charging them with their unwise course, for fear of division, but met the Jewish brethren, to avoid division, and

adopted certain articles from the law, which were not contrary to the evangelical truth, and determined that those who had been converted from among the Gentiles should not be troubled, and that no burden should be laid upon them, than that they should abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication. By this the Jews were pacified, for they might easily think that they were right in a measure at least, because some articles from the law were imposed upon the Gentiles.

We note that in Acts 15:29, the church leaders asked the Gentiles to keep only the few articles out of the Law. They did not refer them to all the moral law." It appears this was guidance for an immediate need of that time, given as a peace-making measure. Paul makes it clear in his writings that it is not wrong to eat meat offered to idols. He taught that, aside from being careful not to offend the weak, we should not be concerned whether the food we eat passes the standards of the Law or not.

The question arises why fornication was included here. Was there any question as to whether fornication was sin or not? When this scripture is studied in various translations, we find that some give it as "illicit marriages," some as "unlawful marriages. This would include relationships cited in Leviticus 18 and 20. No doubt they would have a certain tolerance for people who did not know better and would engage in such marriages (as Abraham, who married his half-sister Sarah). However, in this there is a violation of a natural principle, which in time would have its adverse consequences.

Our practice of sisters not wearing pants would be a similar application as the apostles' direction in Acts 15. It seems good to the Holy Ghost and to us, in today's setting, that we uphold this prohibition. However, our basis is not in literally keeping the commandment found in Deuteronomy 22:5.

The church is "the pillar and ground of the truth," and it behooves us to have sound doctrine. However, as our Lord has much patience with us, may we also have forbearance with one another. Paul wrote, "For Christ is the end of the law for true righteousness to everyone that believeth" Romans 10:4). While there may be some variation in understanding, as there was in the apostolic period, it is imperative that we possess the "true righteousness" of Christ. May we abide in His love, so we can be kept on the holy pathway to a blessed end.

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