

## “An Aid to Discerning the Scriptures”

(Lesson by Dr. Douglas Jacoby,  
adapted and refined by Jeff Chacon  
for use at a leadership conference,  
with Douglas’ permission.)

- Introduction
  - Jesus prayed that his followers would be “completely unified” (John 17:23) on the truth of God’s Word (John 17:17).
    - God’s Word is our one and only standard for life and doctrine (1 Timothy 4:13-16).
  - Q: But what about when good brothers genuinely disagree about the meaning and/or application of scripture? What do we do then?
    - In Romans 14, Paul teaches us that there are “opinion” matters in the faith that we will disagree on. (His example was eating food sacrificed to idols.)
      - In those cases, he advises us to keep what we believe between ourselves and God, and not cause others to stumble by what we believe about these “opinion matters” (Romans 14:22).
  - Q: But what about more important matters of the faith? Matters that are more important than “opinion matters”, and yet we still have differences of opinion about how to interpret and/or apply God’s Word regarding them?
    - This lesson attempts to provide a framework for helping us to work through these issues in order to preserve the precious unity among Christians that Jesus prayed for.
- Theme passage: 2 Timothy 2:15 = “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.”
  - As disciples of Jesus it is important that we “correctly handle the word of truth”.
    - The exact translation of this phrase in the original Greek = “rightly dividing the word of truth”.
  - Q: But what exactly does this biblical phrase mean?
- One possible meaning = “rightly dividing” means “proficient handling”.
  - We must proficiently (expertly) handle the Bible when we teach it.
    - Example: Paul calls the word of God “the sword of the Spirit” in Ephesians 6:17; so, we must become expert

swordsmen, able to wield the weapon of God's Word effectively.

- Another possible meaning = "rightly dividing" means "straight cutting".
  - This approach looks at the phrase as agricultural terminology, teaching us to be like a plowman who plows a straight furrow in the soil. In the same way, we are to be straight-forward with the Word of God, and not deviate from the straight path that it designates.
- A third possible meaning: "rightly dividing the word of truth" is an expression taken from the priests dividing the sacrifices.
  - Quote from C. H. Spurgeon on this interpretation of the phrase:
    - "When they had a lamb or a sheep, a ram or a bullock to offer, after they had killed it, it was cut in pieces, carefully and properly; and it requires no little skill to find out where the joints are, so as to cut up an animal discreetly. Now, the word of truth has to be taken to pieces wisely; it is not to be hacked or torn as by a wild beast, but rightly divided. There has to be Discrimination And Dissection. It is a great part of a minister's duty to be able to dissect the gospel – to lay one piece there, and another there, and preach with clearness, distinction, and discrimination."
  - So, a modern way to say this might be: we need to use discernment in how we distinguish between scriptures.
- All three of these possible meanings have value for us.
  - But let's build on the third one, about proper discernment, and present an idea that may be helpful to us in distinguishing between biblical doctrines.
- Thesis: Not all biblical doctrines are equally important (bull's eye analogy)
  - Central (or Core) doctrines (essential to salvation)
    - As on a target with concentric circles, this is the "bull's eye".
      - Example: the deity of Jesus Christ.
        - We cannot be saved unless we believe the truth that Jesus was the Son of God.
  - Important doctrines (but essential to salvation?)
    - Example: can a woman serve the church as an Evangelist?
      - This issue has very important ramifications.
      - Q: But is it a "salvation threatening issue"?

- Q: If a brother or sister holds to this teaching, is he/she lost?
- Q: What about a church? Should we discontinue our fellowship with them because of this disagreement alone?
  - These questions require discernment.
- Peripheral doctrines (“disputable matters” – Romans 14:1)
  - Example: The 6 days of creation: literal or figurative days?
    - Q: Is this a “salvation threatening” issue?
    - Q: Do we all have to agree on whether the 6 days of creation in Genesis are literal or figurative?
      - Requires discernment.
- Unimportant doctrines (no theological or practical impact)
  - Example: How tall was Goliath?
    - Certainly no one believes that we all have to agree on this unimportant point to be saved.
- A List of Core Teachings?
  - It would sure be easier if there was a list of “core teachings” in scripture. Then we would know for sure which issues are “core” and which are not.
  - Q: Is that list found in Ephesians 4?
    - Ephesians 4:3-6 = “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”
      - Q: Is this a comprehensive list of “Core Biblical Doctrines”?
        - One body
        - One Spirit
        - One hope
        - One Lord
        - One faith
        - One baptism
        - One God and Father
      - A: It does not appear that this was Paul’s intention.
        - Therefore, to assume that would be dubious at best.

- Q: What about Jesus' teaching about the greatest commandments being to love God and love your neighbor? (Matthew 22:37-40)
    - Love is not listed separately in Paul's "7 unifying truths" of Ephesians 4.
  - Q: What about the writer of Hebrew's list of "elementary teachings about Christ" in Hebrews 6:1-2?
    - "Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, 2instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment."
      - Not listed specifically in the Ephesians 4 list =
        - repentance
        - laying on of hands (of course, not applicable today)
        - resurrection
        - eternal judgment
      - Aren't these "core teachings" too?
  - Main Point: Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive list of "core teachings" in scripture, so we must discern the relative importance of different biblical doctrines ourselves, but we must not presume to make a list of "core teachings" ourselves, lest we want to write our own creed.
  - An old restoration movement saying that may help us:
    - "In matters of faith, unity. In matters of opinion, liberty. In all things, love."
- To differentiate between biblical doctrines involves some differences of opinion.
  - Here's an exercise to show that even what we consider "core", "important", "peripheral", or "unimportant" varies with our own opinions.
  - Write down on a sheet of paper what you think the relative importance is of the following doctrinal issues, (either: Core, Important, Peripheral or Unimportant), and then let's just take turns reading our answers to each other (without discussion at this point) in order to see:

- Where we agree (a consensus would give ample support to that position).
    - Where we disagree (this will help us to see that some issues can be categorized two or three different ways, and so we must not be dogmatic about those issues.)
  - What level of importance would you assign to each of these issues?
    - Is water baptism essential for salvation?
    - Is it a sin to get a tattoo?
    - Are the “gifts of the Holy Spirit” available for us as Christians today?
    - Should our teens go swimming with boys and girls together?
    - Can an Elder have children who are not baptized disciples?
    - Is hell a time of punishment followed by extinction, or is it “without end”?
    - Can a disciple of Jesus divorce their spouse because of domestic violence?
    - Does a person need to be a disciple of Jesus to be saved?
    - What is the earliest age that a person should be baptized?
    - Should we use musical instruments in our Sunday worship services?
  - Main Point = Even agreeing amongst ourselves about which issues are “core”, “important”, “peripheral” or “unimportant” is difficult for us. No wonder unity is so difficult to achieve!
- Some Applications
  - We cannot insist that every doctrine is “equally important”, or else we will be hopelessly divided along endless matters of opinion that appear in our minds as “salvation threatening” issues.
    - When asked “Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus did not say: “They’re all from God, so therefore they are all equally important.”
      - Instead Jesus said: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matthew 22:37-40).”
    - If Jesus made a distinction between God’s commands, then so should we.

- We should emphasize what the bible emphasizes more than our own agendas.
  - This will safeguard us from imbalance and disproportion in our teaching.
- We should accept other churches who have different opinions about “peripheral” issues.
- We as preachers and teachers must constantly seek more biblical training.
- Every Christian must continually seek more biblical training.
  - All members are still responsible for their own personal study.
- Close
  - Jesus prayed for his followers to be unified.
    - But thinking exactly alike about even important matters is perhaps not what Jesus meant by unity.
      - Perhaps a better definition of unity is the one Elder/Evangelist Gordon Ferguson likes to use: “Unity is not thinking alike; unity is thinking together.”
  - Let us strive for unity, remembering the old restoration saying: “In matters of faith, unity. In matters of opinion, liberty. In all things, love.”