

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth in 2 Timothy 2:15 and its Theological Implication for the Contemporary Church

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Abstract

The church is divided into two: the part that has correct understanding of what theology means and the part that gets ‘threatened’ at the mere mention of theology and feels theology has not gotten a space in the church. The objectives of this paper were to examine the importance of rightly dividing the word of truth *ὀρθοτομοῦντα τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας*, and to reestablish its theological implication for contemporary church. Exegetical, historical and sociological methods were used. The paper found out that rightly dividing *ὀρθοτομοῦντα* as used by Paul in 2 Timothy 2:15 has a verbal function which is to participate in the action of the main verb ‘be diligent’, *Σπούδασον* and rightly dividing, *Ὀρθοτομοῦντα* is the participle. Hence, the idea being brought out is: as we diligently seek to be approved of God we must rightly divide the Word of Truth. Therefore rightly dividing *Ὀρθοτομοῦντα* should be understood as the gnomic kind, which states a general timeless fact or principle. As a direct command: it must be binding on the church as any other command in the Scripture.

Key Words Studies: theology, be diligent, rightly dividing, church, word of truth

Introduction

If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain (NIV) 1 Tim 6:3-5.

This passage reveals who a preacher of the gospel is and how he or she occupies a central place in the life of a congregation. The nature of his work enables him to be called first and foremost a theologian. He is an interpreter and his theological interpretation of a particular passage is the fruit of the reflection of the church on the truth revealed in the word of God which may be modified by the knowledge of a theological truth based on other passages. It is the knowledge of theology that develops our mind in the image of God, knows and appreciates God’s revelation, knows God better, arranges doctrine for Christian fellowship, recognizes heresy and used in popular instruction in any Christian gathering. This is because the subject and object of theology is God. The scope of theology includes not only God, but creation, human being, the fall, redemption, final destiny among others. Sound biblical theology

therefore provides support, shape and stability to the body of Christ. Surprisingly, the church is divided into two: the part that has correct understanding of what theology means and the part that gets ‘threatened’ at the mere mention of theology and feels it has not gotten a space in the church. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to examine the importance of rightly dividing the Word of Truth *Ὁρθοτομοῦντα τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας*, and to re-establish its theological implication for the contemporary church.

Conceptualization of Theology

The term theology is ambiguous etymologically, historically, and systematically. Etymologically, theology is from two Greek words: *Θεός* and *λόγος*; *Θεός* means God while *λόγος* means the “word,” “discourse,” “account,” or “language”¹. Therefore, theology is the discourse of God. The question, however, remains: Does it mean the word of God as a subjective genitive, namely, God’s own discourse? Or is it an objective genitive, meaning discourse about God? The former refers to the divine discourse itself, whereas the second refers to the human effort to understand the divine.² Within the early Christian tradition, both usages are present. Saint Augustine uses the term *theologia* in *The City of God* in its objective sense to refer to discourse about the divine (*de divinitate ratio sive sermo*).³ Among the Greek writers, Dionysius the Areopagite (c. sixth century), for example, uses *theologia* to designate not a human science, but the divine discourse itself, particularly the divine discourse of the Holy Scriptures. The Holy Scriptures do not just speak of God but are God’s speech. Today, this

¹ Wiley, H.O and Culbertson.1946. *Introduction to Christian Theology*. Kansas city, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press.

² Ferdinand, Kattenbusch. 1962. "Die Entstehung einer christlichen Theologie: Zur Geschichte der Ausdrücke theologia, theologiein, theologos." *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 11 161–205.

³ Murray, Michael J, and Michael Rea. 2012. "Philosophy and Christian Theology." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. August 9. Accessed November 9, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/christiantheology-philosophy/>

usage no longer prevails, and theology refers primarily to the human study of God.⁴ The term theology emerged as the umbrella expression for Christian doctrine. It was in the thirteenth century that the term theology came to have the comprehensive meaning that it has for us today.⁵ Systematically, the present usage of the term is ambiguous. Theology is often used as an umbrella term to cover all the theological disciplines. Yet, the term also denotes a specific discipline known as systematic theology. The division of the theological disciplines is the result of a long process within modern times.⁶ Theology also according to Wakefield is “that science which treats of the existence, the character, and attributes of God; His laws and government; the doctrines which we are to believe, the moral change we must experience and the duties we are required to perform.”⁷

Theology is a fragile discipline in that it is both academic and related to faith. As an academic discipline, theology shares all the scholarly goals of other academic disciplines: it strives for historical exactitude, conceptual rigor, systematic consistency, and interpretive clarity. In its relation to faith, theology shares the fragility of faith itself. It is much more a hope than a science. Christian theology, therefore, is concerned not with human words and thoughts about a god, but with all God's creative and redemptive ways and works with humanity in Jesus Christ; thus theology is also concerned with human response to this Word spoken by God alone. The necessity for this concern is grounded in the nature of the Word of revelation.

Exegesis of 2 Timothy 2:15

The Greek New Testament of 2 Timothy 2:15 says: *Σπούδασον σεαυτὸν δόκιμον παραστήσαι τῷ Θεῷ, ἐργάτην ἀνεπαίσχυντον, ὀρθοτομοῦντα τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας.*⁸ The

⁴ Richard, Krejcir J. 2002. *Why is Theology Important?* October 2. Accessed October 17, 2017. <http://www.churchleadership.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=71446>.

⁵ Rivière, J. 1936. "Theologia." *Revue des sciences religieuses* 16 47–57.

⁶ Edward, Farley. 1983. *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

⁷ Wakefield, S. 1869. *Christian Theology*. New York: Hunt and Eaton.

⁸ Aland, B., and et.al. 2007. *The UBS Greek New Testament*. Germany: Deutsche Biblegesellschaft.

same passage in the King James Version says “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”. This particular verse has three verbs in the Greek text: two of the verbs are in the aorist tense while one is in the present participle. The first verb in the aorist tense is *σπούδασον*, which, literally translated, to be diligent (KJV – study). The second verb, which is an infinitive (verbal noun), is *παραστήσαι*, and may be translated as: to present. The last verb, which is a participle (verbal noun) is *ὀρθοτομοῦντα*, which is commonly translated ‘rightly dividing’⁹. Each of the verbs is studied separately and applications spelled out.

1.Σπούδασον. This is aorist imperative and it is variously translated "be diligent," "be eager," "make every effort." The term according to Gunther usually implies both sustained effort and deep-rooted, serious, ethical motivation. He also adds that it could be translated "Make this your highest priority," or "Pour yourself into this task."¹⁰ Wommack further adds that this Greek word is used ten times in the New Testament and this is the only time it is translated "study." It was translated "forward" (Gal. 2:10); "endeavouring" (Eph. 4:3); "endeavoured" (1 Thes. 2:17); "endeavour" (2 Pet. 1:15); "do . . . diligence" (2 Tim. 4:9, 21); "diligent" (Tit. 3:12, 2 Pet 3:14); and "labour" (Heb. 4:11)¹¹. The King James Version here reads "Study to show [yourself] approved." This gloss has been criticized as an inaccurate translation of the verb *σπουδάω*. Firstly, *σπουδάω* according to Verbrugge is not restricted to mere study. It involves the whole person—heart, soul, and mind. Secondly, to translate this verb as "study" implies that the "Word of Truth" is a synonym for Scripture. Most likely, however, "Word of Truth" refers to the good news of Jesus Christ, which Paul had passed on to Timothy in oral

⁹ Tenney, M.C. 1973. *A parsing guide to the Greek New Testament compiled by Nathan E.H.* Scottdale: Herald press.

¹⁰ Gunther, H. 1971. "*σπουδάω*" in *Theological dictionary New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

¹¹ Wommack, A. 2012. "Liberty Bible commentary." July 23. Accessed February 2, 2015. http://www.awmi.net/bible/2ti_02_15.

instruction.¹² Nevertheless, King James Version should be defended here, for the word "study" in 1611 English meant very much what idiomatic "pour yourself into this task" suggests. Only in later English usage did "study" take on a strictly cognitive sense¹³. Therefore, since the word has changed in its meaning, it communicates something quite different from what Paul intended.¹⁴

Σπούδασον. Verb, aorist active imperative, second person singular, refers to Timothy, the primary recipient of the Epistle.¹⁵ This verb is in the imperative mood. Mood relates the verbal idea to the speaker's attitude or purported attitude. It presents something either as a fact or a possibility. Wenham establishes that there are four classifications of mood. The first is the indicative, which is the mood of assertion; second is the subjunctive, which is the mood of probability; third is the operative, which is the mood of possibility and the last is the imperative mood, which is the mood of intention. This particular verb is in the imperative mood making it a command.¹⁶ There are four basic uses of the imperative mood, namely: the cohortative, which makes a positive and direct command; the prohibitive, which makes a negative command; the entreaty, which expresses request rather than a direct command, and the permissive, which is the use of the third person imperative and needs the English auxiliary verb "let" to make its meaning clear.¹⁷

¹² Verbrugge, V. D. 2000. "σπουδάξω" in *New International dictionary of New Testament abridged edition*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan

¹³ Hornby, A.S. 2005. "Study" in *Oxford learner's dictionary of current English seven edition*. Oxford: University Press. p.1470.

¹⁴ Wallace, D.B. 2012. "Crisis of the Word or A message to pastors and would-be pastors." July 23. Accessed October 17, 2017. <http://bible.org/article/crisis-word-or-message-pastors-and-would-be-pastors-2-timothy-215>.

¹⁵ Tenney, M.C. 1973. *A parsing guide to the Greek New Testament compiled by Nathan E.H.* Scottdale: Herald press.

¹⁶ Wenham, J.W. 1988. *The element of New Testament Greek*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁷ Casido, B. 2012. *A syntactical study of 2 Timothy 2:15*. July 23. Accessed October 13, 2017. <http://www.spiritualblessings.org/2tim.html>.

Σπούδασον can be safely classified as cohortative as this strongly suggests and expresses a positive and direct command. The tense of this particular verb is aorist. Aorist tense, basically, is indefinite as to time; when conveying abstract ideas, they express timeless truth. This peculiar tense to the Greek grammar was found to correspond closely to the English form often called “simple-present”, which is really an English aorist, or indefinite form referring to a timeless fact or principle. According to Nordquist, in English grammar, the gnomic present is a verb in the present tense used to express a general truth without reference to time. Also called gnomic aspect and generic aspect.¹⁸ Casido suggests four kinds of the aorist tense, such as the ingressive, constative, gnomic, epistolary, for example, *σπούδασον* is of the gnomic kind, which states a general timeless fact or principle.¹⁹ This particular verb expresses both a direct command and a timeless general principle. The idea of gnomic aorist suggests a general principle. Here in this verse is a general and also a guiding principle. The most common way this verse is interpreted is to say that: if we study well, God approves of us and what we have done. It is more correctly interpreted that through our study, persevering and careful in work, hard-working, industrious, that which is done with carefulness, steadfastness, we prove to ourselves that we have been approved or accepted of God through the Lord Jesus Christ.²⁰

2. παραστήσαι (to present). This is first aorist infinitive. An infinitive is a verbal noun. As a verb, its purpose is to express the goal of the verb to which it stands related. In this case, it expresses the goal of the main verb, *Σπούδασον* (give diligence). This infinitive is exegetical, that is, it clarifies and completes the thought of the main verb. This infinitive answers the question, “be diligent to what?” The aorist tense reinforces the idea of it being

¹⁸ Nordquist, R. 2017 <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-english-grammar1690579> March 23, 2017 accessed on Dec.02, 2017.

¹⁹ Casido, B. 2012. *A syntactical study of 2 Timothy 2:15*. July 23.

²⁰ Oyetade, M.O. 2013. "An Exegetical Interpretation of the Greek Language in 2 Timothy 2:15 with Reference to σπουδάξω (Study)." *Ilorin Journal of Linguistics, Literature & Culture*. 3 101-111.

epexegetical. Being a qualifier and modifier of the main verb, this word must therefore agree with the tense of the main verb, hence the aorist tense.²¹ If Christians are to be diligent about something, it must be in the realm of making themselves approved before God. Any practice that does not contribute to this intent must, by all means, be dismissed. To make ourselves approved of God is not a once-only task; it must be an earnest and continued effort.

3. ὀρθοτομοῦντα (rightly dividing). Accusative masculine, present participle of ὀρθοτομέω a late and rare compound (ὀρθοτομος, cutting straight, ὀρθός and τέμνω) here only in the New Testament. It occurs in Proverbs 3:6; 11:5 for making straight paths ὁδούς with which compare Hebrews 12:13 and "the Way" in Acts 9:2. Robertson explains it to mean: plowing a straight furrow. The metaphor is that of a stone mason cutting the stones straight since τέμνω and ὀρθός are so used. Ὀρθοτομοῦντα (present participle). A participle is a verbal adjective. Its verbal function is to participate in the action of the main verb. Being in the present tense, it indicates action, which is contemporary with the action of the main verb. The main verb in this verse is Σπούδασον (be diligent) and Ὀρθοτομοῦντα (rightly dividing) is the participle.²² Hence, the idea being brought out is: as we diligently seek to be approved of God we must rightly divide the Word of Truth. In other words, the more we seek diligently God's approval the more we must be occupied in or with the rightly divided Truth.²³

On the issue of finding God's approval, there is no substitute for the rightly dividing of the Word. No amount of Christian practice will gain God's approval apart from the right division of the Word of Truth. Hence, any practice whatever or however sincere and faithful it may be will only result in God's disapproval if not based on the principle of right division. To be approved of God may possibly require several and different ways and means, but what is

²¹ Casido, B. 2012. *A syntactical study of 2 Timothy 2:15*. July 23.

²² Robertson, A.T. 2006. *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. electronic database: Broadman Press.

²³ Casido, B. 2012. *A syntactical study of 2 Timothy 2:15*. July 23.

most interesting in this passage is that the entire conceivable ways and means only one is mentioned, namely: the right dividing of the word of Truth. The reason seems obvious – our Christian practices or works are only the result of our knowledge of the word. In other words, we are not better than our theology. Hence, a knowledge based on the word not rightly divided will surely result in wrong practice. Therefore, to be a workman not needing to be ashamed is the result of the right division of the Word of Truth.

Theological Implication for the Contemporary Church

A church without theology is a church without God, as theology is about knowing who God is and what He has done for us which affects all of our beings, including relationships, goals, and the directions we take in life. A theology without a loving, sovereign God is simply not an option for the church or our daily faith, because we will replace Him with idols, or our own will! A Christian life without good doctrine behind it will be meaningless and shallow at best; erroneous and cultic at worst! Therefore, theology, that is good theology, is a logical system of truth that is rationally defused from what the Scriptures clearly teach. We are never to read in what is not there or just believe in something because it is what we grew up being taught, such an act is eisegesis. We are to be Bible-believing Christians who crave to put the Bible first-above all desires, feelings, or schemes of thought. Therefore, below are some selected points that reveal the implication of theology in the Church:

Theology is the Knowledge and Application of Faith

What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you-guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us (2 Timothy 1:13-14 NIV).

The passage above is a proof that theology is our boot camp and our duty is in application; it is the instrument with which God feeds our souls and grows our faith. The call of Theology is to continue to live in Christ, to be mentored and disciplined so the truth of Christianity and solid doctrine gets inside of us, and then goes outside of us as we pass on the

message of God to someone else. In other words, engaging the Word and Truth and passing it along-paying it forward (1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 3:6; 1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 3:16; Titus 2:1). The danger for the Christian is to sit in a pew, learn all she or he can, and then take comfort in that knowledge, never doing anything with it. The call is to know and be prepared by faith, to grow in spiritual maturity, to develop godly character, and to be infused by the Spirit and His resulting Fruit. Simply put, it is for this reason that Christ came. In the meantime, we partake in the building of His Kingdom with the bricks of our faith, each one interlocking with another.

Theology is Attaining Spiritual Maturity

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ (Colossians 2:8).

The Colossians had received the Gospel, but now they were diluting it with falsehoods, missing the main thing just as many churches, TV ministries, and so-called pastors do today. Oyetade calls this attitude ‘religious abuse’, which is the causing psychological, spiritual and emotional damage suffered by members of authoritarian communities of faith whenever its spiritual authority is twisted by spiritual leaders to achieve a desired goal through unethical, cruel and damaging means.²⁴ Theology has the theme of "paying it forward," meaning we receive a gift from God that is meant to be known and shared and passed on. We benefit from it and we get to continually use it, but we also get to show others so they can take it and pay and pass it on, and so forth. The reason why Paul used this metaphor in Colossians 2:8 is because the Colossians had become complacent and believed that I received Christ so I can rest in my laurels and do nothing with my faith now. Saved? Yes, perhaps. But, of what good are we in the kingdom when we do not learn and grow in the Lord? What good are we if we are not able to further the Gospel because we are disobedient to His Word?

²⁴ Oyetade, M.O, 2013. “The Abuse of Pastoral Authority in some Churches in Nigeria Today” *UMA Journal of Philosophy & Religious Studies* 8 35-48.

Good Theology is based on God's Word

Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults (1Corinthians 14:20 NIV).

We need to be aware of bad practices and traditions formed from bad ideas - those without merit, thought, or scriptural guidance. The Pharisees were famous for making their own traditions then forcing and conniving so others would obey them, thus missing what God had actually intended. Jesus responded to them in Matthew 23 by judging the leaders, who beguiled the people and dishonoured God by their hypocrisy. He speaks to the multitude and to His disciples, saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat." Being thus expositors of the law, they were to be obeyed in all that they said according to that law, although their own conduct was but hypocrisy. The point for us is to not make up traditions that remove or distract from His principles. We are to see the Church as His and us as the servants; we worship and placate Christ, lift Him up, and never allow our ways to become "front and centre".²⁵ Thus, we must make sure and certain, as Paul urges, that our traditions are from Christ, and that they are true, mutually beneficial, and used to further His Gospel and Kingdom. It is incumbent on us to remember that we are never to separate theology from practice. Theology is the "who" and "why" that translates into the "do" and "be" of life.²⁶ The question is, will we be dedicated to our Lord or to ourselves? Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matt.4:4 NIV).

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 NIV).

Therefore, in the words of Krejcir, theology good theology, "is a logical system of truth that is rationally defused from what the Scriptures clearly teach. We are never to read in what is not there or just believe in something because it is what we grew up being taught. We begin as Bible-believing Christians who crave to put the Bible first-above all desires, feelings, or schemes of thought".²⁷ Moreover, Marc Cortez identifies four ways theology is practical to

²⁵ Richard, Krejcir J. 2002. *Why is Theology Important?* October 2. Accessed October 17, 2017. <http://www.churchleadership.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=71446>.

²⁶Krejcir,R.J. 2011. *Francis A. Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development* www.churchleadership.org/

²⁷Krejcir J. 2002. *Why is Theology Important?*

everyday life of the Church. The first on his list is worship. He pointed out that theology is fundamentally about knowing God more deeply, which necessarily leads to both love and worship. In other words, falling more deeply in love with him while at the same time falling on our knees in awe before him. Therefore, knowledge, love, and worship are the inseparable triad of good theology. Worship is the business of humanity. We were created to glorify God by living as His image bearers in the world, and this is something that should characterize every minute of every day. And when God's people gather to worship Him together, they are doing the very thing for which they were created. Thus, if theology deepens worship, then theology is inherently *practical*—i.e. relevant to the everyday reality of being human. The second is Transformation: **Marc Cortez** also adds that if you are truly knowing God and being known by God, you cannot stay the same. You will be shaped by that experience. So, once again, we see that theology is inherently practical in the sense that it affects who you are and therefore how you live in the world. Theology remains practical in that it shapes us as the ones performing the practice.

The third is service: Theology plays the role of servant in the life of the church. One of its fundamental jobs is to help the church think well and carefully about how best to understand, articulate, and live out what it believes. Theology does not exist for itself, only for the Church. And in that sense, theology, as long as it remains faithful to its calling, must always be practical (i.e. inseparably related to the practice of the Church). Theology as servant will always be an eminently practical theology.

The fourth according to Marc Cortez is inquiry: If theology is an inquiry into who God is, and if God is as transcendent and mysterious as we believe Him to be, we should not be surprised by the fact that theology wrestles, at times, with questions that do not clearly relate to specific practices, but they are still part of the broader process of knowing God, which is eminently practical in the best sense of the word. He concluded by saying that if by “practical”

we mean that theology should relate to the everyday lives of regular people, then absolutely yes! If theology is the attempt to know God more deeply, and if this means that theology at its best leads to deeper worship, greater personal transformation, and more effective ministry in the church, then theology is deeply practical even when wrestling with questions where it's not entirely obvious how they connect to everyday issues.²⁸

Conclusion

The paper was set out to examine the importance of rightly dividing the Word of Truth, ὀρθοτομοῦντα τὸν λόγον τῆς ἀληθείας and to re-establish its theological implication for the contemporary church. The paper then found out that Ὀρθοτομοῦντα should be understood as the gnomic kind of statement, which states a general timeless fact or principle. As a direct command Ὀρθοτομοῦντα must be binding on the Church as any other command in the Scripture. Again, 2 Tim. 2: 15 is a general as well as guiding principle for believers in Christ. Hence, the idea being brought out is: as we diligently seek to be approved of God we must rightly divide the Word of Truth. In other words, we must correctly dissect the Word of God. It then follows that as distinct from those who engage in needless theological chatter, Christians should do what is right in line with the Word of Truth. On the other hands, when theology disappears from the church and its leaders, the paper found out that the basis of God will not be understood and likewise God's approval for such a church and leaders cannot be gotten, this is because they will have a "free for all" of what they think is the truth, which will not correctly present God. The situation whereby God is moved to the backseat for the god of self or of the favoured trend of the day will be the central focus of people's faith and that will carve and give easy access to hell. Consequence upon that, the church will be unable to think wisely about her culture, that is who she is in Christ, or who

²⁸ Cortez, Marc. 2014. "Does Theology Have to Be Practical?" *Every Day Theology*. October 2. Accessed November 10, 2017. <http://marccortez.com/2014/10/02/theology-practical/>.

God is and what God did. Instead, she will take in what feels good, leaving God and His ways behind her. Therefore, theology only will accomplish a liberating service for the Church only if it resists the temptation to absolutize itself by identifying itself with the Word of God. True theology is the Church's Word about God, which responds to and is controlled by the Word that God Himself has spoken in His self-revelation.