

“RIGHTLY DIVIDING” – PART ONE

Churches of Christ have properly demanded adherence to Paul’s comment that we are “*rightly dividing the word of truth*” (2 Timothy 2:15). Typically, we have taught that God’s word can be divided into three broad areas; namely, the Patriarchal period, the Mosaic period and the Christian period. While God himself is unchanging (Malachi 3:6; c.f. Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29; Hebrews 6:17) he does deal differently with man at different periods. The Patriarchal period saw God communicating his will directly to the fathers, like Abraham. In the Mosaic period God spoke primarily through Moses and selected prophets. Man was to adhere to the law God gave Moses at Sinai. In the Christian era, God has spoken through his son (Hebrews 1:1-2) who is the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). Therefore, and we will discuss this further a bit later, we live today under the law of Christ. We are not responsible for keeping the commands given under either the Patriarchal or the Mosaic periods.

In recent times, a brother in another state has begun to aggressively assert that the Gospels; that is, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, ought to be considered a part of the Old Testament. He affirms that nothing in the Gospels before the cross of Christ may be used as a doctrinal statement and that we must neither compel people to obey these pre-cross sayings nor may we formulate doctrine based upon those statements. Because of this “stirring of the waters” we think it appropriate to take a closer look at how the Bible is divided and how those divisions affect us today. In the process, we will strive to answer the question of where the Gospels fit into the Bible and most importantly, where they fit into God’s plan for our lives. But before we address the question of the Gospels, let us turn to the organization of the Bible and the organization of God’s plan of redemption.

Without a doubt, the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ at Calvary is the centerpiece of God’s work of salvation (Matthew 26:28; Romans 3:25; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14; 1 John 1:7). But the plan, crafted even before creation (Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:20) actually began to unfold in Eden following man’s sin. There, God promised that one would follow through the seed of woman, who would bruise the head of Satan (Genesis 3:15). The ending of the plan is not found in Bible days for each man is responsible for his own individual salvation (Philippians 2:12). However, God’s movement in history, his interaction with man is carefully recorded in Scripture.

THE PATRIARCHAL PERIOD

God first dealt with man by speaking directly to him or to the heads of the families. In Eden, God spoke to Adam and Eve directly (Genesis 2:16-17; Genesis 3:8-19). He spoke directly to Cain after the murder of Abel (Genesis 4:6-15). Noah was directly instructed of God as to how to construct the Ark (Genesis 6:13-21). Perhaps the best known of the Patriarchs is Abram who received direct communication with God regarding the coming of a great nation and the Savior himself (Genesis 12:1-3 and many others). The key distinction of the Patriarchal period is that God dealt with man directly. Sometimes, God would work through a prophet especially when seeking to call an entire nation back to righteousness. But generally man’s relationship to God was separate and apart from any system of laws and was based upon specific instructions given by God.

“RIGHTLY DIVIDING” – PART TWO

THE PATRIARCHAL PERIOD

In our last article, we introduced the period of Bible history often referred to as the Patriarchal period. This period was the first and lacked any codified or written system of laws. This is not to say that man was without law. God expected a prescribed form of worship and was displeased when man worshipped him improperly. Although we are not told the specifics of such guidance, it is clear that some instruction existed for the offering of Cain was not respected by God while that of his brother Abel was. Paul, speaking of differences between the Jews and Gentiles, says: *“For there is no respect of persons with God. For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law”* (Romans 2:11-12). This speaks to those who were still worshipping apart from Judaism and makes the point that all men must live righteously before Jehovah God. He continues: *“For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves”* (Romans 2:14). So we see that the Gentiles, that is, non-Jews or those under the Patriarchal system were actually expected to live by law. But their law was not “the law” or Mosaic Law of verse 12, it was law given to them by God but separate from Judaism.

New Bible students often think that the three dispensations or periods of law were mutually exclusive. In other words, one ended when the next began. This is generally true when speaking of the coming of the Christian age, but is incorrect when considering the Patriarchal age. With the exception of the Jews, all men from the beginning until the cross were under the Patriarchal age.

The Mosaic Age

The Law of Moses was given only to one nation and that was the Jews. It is very important to appreciate the uniqueness of the law given at Sinai and to understand that it has no authority over any man today.

God gave a new and unique system of laws to the Hebrew nation shortly after their exodus from Egypt (Exodus 20). Notice that as he begins to give the Law, he clearly indicates to whom he is speaking, *“I am the Lord thy God which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage”* (Exodus 20:2) Of course, the Jews were the only ones brought out by God., therefore, they were the only ones to whom the Law was given. Nowhere is the Law ever made applicable to anyone other than the nation of Israel.

This system is variously spoken of as the Law of Moses, the Mosaic system or the Levitical law. It is not the same as the Old Testament. The Old Testament is a collection of books which contain the Law of Moses as well as material not included in Mosaic Law. As an example, all of Genesis and the first 19 chapters of Exodus occur before the Law was given at Sinai. It is thought that Job occurs long before the giving of the Law as well. Throughout the Old Testament, references are made to people not under the Mosaic covenant who, nevertheless, were expected to be obedient to God. Consider Jonah being sent to Nineveh, a city of Assyria, to call the people to repentance. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon was blessed by God and worshipped Jehovah (Daniel 4:1-3, 17, 34-37) but was never a Jew and thus never amenable to

the Law of Moses. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job, Nebuchadnezzar, Darius the Mede and others like them never once kept a Passover nor ever assembled at the temple or tabernacle and they were never expected to. They were however, expected to be God-fearing people. Cornelius, of Acts 10, is another example of a non-Jew who worshipped God. Luke says of Cornelius that he was a “*devout man, and one that feared God with all his house*” (Acts 10:2). Cornelius was never to obey the Law of Moses. He lived under God’s Patriarchal system and was baptized into Christ (Acts 10:47-48) thus completely bypassing the entire Levitical system. It is crucial to one’s understanding of the Bible to appreciate the nature of the Law of Moses and its proper application to one group of people.

One might wisely ask why the Law of Moses was given if it were not for all people. Why would it selectively be given to one group and not to another? These are excellent questions and deserve thorough answers which we will offer next week.

Bryant Evans

NEXT WEEK: “RIGHTLY DIVIDING – PART THREE; THE SCHOOLMASTER