

Title:

Rightly Dividing the Truth: Understanding the difference between the unchangeable principles of the gospel, and the context of the original text.

I have observed a common fear and misunderstanding within the church, regarding scriptural text, the differences in local ministerial guidance, and then the actual principles that the scriptures teach. Many do not understand the differences between these. And because of these misunderstandings, some have unknowingly created confusion, and even worse, some have divided true Christians.

First let's define what the word "principle" means:

A fundamental truth or proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of belief, or behaviors, or for a chain of reasoning. (*Example: "the basic principles of Christianity"*)

It is interesting, and absolutely proper, that the example the dictionary would give would be the basic or foundational principles of Christianity. Because true Christianity is based upon a foundation of unchangeable principles.

And for those who may have a fear of the words "changeable" or "not always the same" in reference to the gospel, let me make this statement right away to help assure you. The principles of the gospel have never changed, and never will! Some of these unchangeable gospel principles are:

- God is love, and he loves everyone so much that he gave his very best, Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of our sins.
- God is true righteousness, and so through Jesus Christ's delivering power, he enables whom he saves from sin, to continue to live free from sin.
- God is Almighty and sovereign over the whole world, and especially to His church. He chooses what gifts to give to whom. He chooses what responsibility each one of us has. And he chooses how to minister through us locally and collectively.

These are principles that never change, because God does not change. And these principles of the gospel come directly from God's very being or existence.

"For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed." ~ Malachi 3:6

This scripture above is particularly speaking of the principle of God's great mercy. The principle of mercy is part of who "he is."

And there are other principles of the gospel that never change, because they are ordained by God for the benefit of mankind on Earth. Principles like: modesty, faith, hope, Christian leadership, etc.

Here is one example of some of these principles in the scripture:

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law." ~ Galatians 5:22-23

In other words, no rule, or law, or local ministration by the leadership of the church should ever negate any of these unchangeable principles from God. Neither should any capability or office given by God be used to negate any of these principles given by God.

These principles cannot be touched without serious consequence. Therefore, in emphasizing the importance for respect for ministerial leadership, the same scripture also re-emphasizes the unchangeable principles delivered to us through Jesus Christ.

“Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and forever.” ~ Hebrews 13:7-8

A minister must first respect these unchangeable principles by incorporating them into “the end of their conversation” - meaning these principles must completely govern their behavior and life. These principles are, or came directly from Jesus Christ. They are given to us by the Holy Spirit working with us, and even more so when he sanctifies us, and reigns within us.

And yet the Holy Spirit will choose to work differently in different situations and because of different needs, according to the his own unchangeable principles.

“Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal.” ~ 1 Corinthians 12:4-7

Thayer’s definition of the original word “administration” as is used in the scripture above:

1. Service, ministering, esp. Of those who execute the commands of others
2. Of those who by the command of God proclaim and promote religion among men
 - a. Of the office of Moses
 - b. Of the office of the apostles and its administration
 - c. Of the office of prophets, evangelists, elders etc.
3. The ministration of those who render to others the offices of Christian affection esp. Those who help meet need by either collecting or distributing of charities
4. The office of the deacon in the church
5. The service of those who prepare and present food

Thayer’s definition of the original word “operation” as is used in the scripture above is:

1. Thing wrought
2. Effect operation

We know that all the above is to be directed by the Holy Spirit through those who minister in some capacity. They often pray for and provide guidance and help to the members of the body of Christ. Every age, culture, congregation, and individual situation can be very different, requiring different guidance and help. So the question is: are we able to allow God to work through each situation and minister differently as God would choose?

The Apostle Paul (the one who wrote the Corinthian Epistles) was keenly aware of the different needs of different cultures. Therefore in the same Epistle he also wrote:

“And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law.” ~ 1 Corinthians 9:20-21

How he approached and ministered to the Jews was drastically different to how he approached and ministered to the gentiles. He did not require circumcision of the gentiles, but when he took Timothy with him where there were many Jews, he had Timothy circumcised so that they could reach both Jews and gentiles in that place (see Acts 16:3).

Let us not find fault when God chooses to work in different ways according to the needs. Any individual or group of ministers who feels that God can only work in one way (for all: time, cultures, congregations and individual situation), is violating a foundational principle of God: God's perfect choice. Church Headquarters is still located in heaven!

A local ministry will always provide guidance to the local flock as is necessary and helpful. Often the term “standard” has been used to describe the guidance of the local ministry. But in reality, the Bible never uses the term “standard” within this type of context. And because in our modern world most people think of “standard” as something universally specified, and unchangeable for all time, confusion arises.

I do not find fault with people using the term “standard,” but I am concerned we understand clearly that there is no such thing in the New Testament as an outward, specific, unchangeable, universal, standard (for example: type or style of clothing or adornment worn). Many of these things are locally cultural. And in a locality where we have many cultures, the less number of different “standards” we have, the better off we all will be, and the more souls we will reach with the gospel! Let us only require what is necessary and helpful to keep us holy and faithful to Jesus Christ, and to complete his great commission to reach the lost world that is within our reach.

As a perfect example, in the late 1800s, Hudson Taylor, a holiness preacher and missionary, successfully evangelized many Chinese (where many others before him had failed.) He was a man that did not just safeguard his holiness, but he reached others with the holy fire of love that God had filled him with! The missionary effort he led was called the “China Inland Mission”. When he started the work he wrote:

“Let us in everything not sinful, become like the Chinese, that by all means we may save some”

Hudson Taylor, and many others that would labor with him, both dressed and adorned their hair and beards according to the common traditions of the then Chinese culture. (Note: there were other Christians who found fault with them for doing this.) But many Chinese people were reached and saved as a result of what they did! It was one of the most successful (and most resisted) missionary efforts ever accomplished in a foreign land.

Today there is a strong underground church of Chinese Christians who have endured severe persecution at the hands of the Chinese Communist Government for many years. These Chinese Christians will tell you that the gospel seeds that began the faith of the Chinese were largely sown many years ago by the sacrifice and labors of Hudson Taylor and the other missionaries who labored with him.

China Inland Mission.



Rev. J. Hudson Taylor & Wife, with Group of Christians

All local ministerial guidance is given by God to serve the needs of the local people. God never ordained it to be the opposite way! But some ministers have mistakenly believed that these things (often called “standards”) are unchangeable, and therefore they exist for the people to serve the “standard.” When they do this, they essentially transform these things that are intended for the people's benefit, into an idol to be rigidly worshipped - and often to divide over!

This is why at the beginning of 1 Corinthians chapter 12 the Apostle specifically warns about not turning these things into idols.

“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant. Ye know that ye were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols, even as ye were led. Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost. Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all.” 1 Corinthians 12:1-5

When the local ministerial guidance becomes rigid and unchangeable, they become things ministers use against some other local part of the body of Christ. They start proclaiming that the “other part of the body of Christ is accursed.”

One may feel that another is less in the Kingdom of God because they are not as “spiritual,” but God does not think that way. If they are saved, they are his and he expects everyone to treat them as if they were Jesus himself.

“And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” ~ Matthew 25:40

No minister is exempt from personally offending Jesus Christ, when they put down another part of the body for local ministerial differences. Note: I'm not talking about differences because of sin. Purposeful sin against the known and understood will of God separates the individual from Christ so that they are no longer part of the body.

There is a trap that too many ministers have fallen into. Because of people compromising the gospel in the past, many are desiring to create a “safe place” in their gospel where nothing changes. But this has proven to be a mistake for four reasons:

1. As already spoken of, it often completely nullifies the choices of the Holy Spirit to specifically minister to the needs of individuals and congregations.
2. It greatly hinders the ability to reach new souls of a different culture with the gospel.
3. It shuts down the opportunity for God to reveal additional light as he would choose.
4. And it divides God's people into local “safe places.”

The reality is that we, the church, have already been warned of these dangers by those who have gone before us over 100 years ago.

Around 1880 a movement of God's Spirit began calling people to true holiness, and to true unity. A second generation after this, in the year 1921, brother Andrew Byers published a book “Birth of a Reformation.” This book contained much of the diary of a man named Daniel Warner. Daniel was greatly used during this

Reformation time, and endured much for the cause of Christ. But the author, Andrew Byers, had an additional reason for publishing the book. And that reason can be found in his introduction to the book.

Andrew Byers takes the time to carefully layout not only the successes of the late 1800s Reformation, but also to warn concerning tendencies he no doubt was already starting to see creep in amongst the attitudes of some ministers.

Andrew Byers warns:

- The church Reformation is based on essential gospel principles.
- The church should spend more effort being who the church is supposed to be, rather than focusing on protecting against sectism. You can't effectively protect against the false, unless you are filled with the Spirit and focused on fulfilling the Word and answering the call of God.
- How we ministered to the needs of the past is not the only way to move forward into the future.
- Don't focus on "we are it" or that "we are the standard for the world", but rather make room for God to reveal further truth, and to reveal it in the way he would choose.
- Refusing fellowship with anyone who is saved is sectarian. Don't do it!
- Any attempt to "corner" all the truth within ourselves will ultimately make us a sect, and the truth will continue on without us.

From the book "Birth of a Reformation" I have quoted what he said verbatim below. You can read this for yourself if you like, starting from page 32 of the book:

"The constructive stage calls not so much for continual denunciation of sects as for manifesting those essential principles that characterize the church in her unity and entirety. The responsibility is to make good the claim, and this means much. Any tendency to establish traditions, or to regard a past course as giving direction in all respects for the future, or to become self-centered and manifest a "we are it" spirit and bar the door of progress against the entrance of further light and truth, or in any way to refuse fellowship with any others who may be Christians, would itself be sectarian, altogether unlike the true reformation, which, if it be final, must necessarily be a restoration and possess universal characteristics.

For proper representation everything depends upon the understanding of, and the attitude toward, this great movement. For any body of people to hold that the reformation is entrusted to them, or that they have become the standard for the world, is a self-centered attitude, vastly different from that which regards the reformation as something prophetically due, as having come independent of man, and as being greater than the people who have been favored with its light, and that it is their part to conform to it in principle, doctrine, and everything. The great movement is in the world, and any attempt to "corner" it or to limit it to a particular body of people could only result in making that body a sect, or faction, while the movement itself would proceed independently."

These are sobering words of warning, as we consider how many we may know that have not taken heed to the warning. Perhaps these words may even find a need in ourselves we were not aware of.

The following is taken from a message titled "The True Standard", preached by Brother H.M. Riggle at a camp meeting in 1913.

"Any creed larger than the Bible is too large, just as any creed smaller than the Bible is too small. We have positively no right to enact any rules or regulations or to enjoin upon our fellow ministers and the church of God any past traditions or new observances not clearly based on Bible principles. To do so is

to fall into the rut of creedism, and to depart from what is a fundamental truth; namely, that the written Word of God is our only standard. Past reformations wrecked upon the rock of traditionalism, and we shall do well to steer clear of this. In the New Testament will be found the true standard of life and experience. To go outside of this is to resort to man-made rules and traditions. Traditional law once imbibed and fully established in the mind and conscience, becomes as sacred to the one practicing it as divine law, and is no easy thing to shake off.

In the revealed Word, God said what he meant, and meant all he said. In the New Testament will be found God's standard of repentance, justification, sanctification, and unity, and the every-day life and practice of a Christian—just what God requires. Even those who adhere to creeds admit this. They say that "everything that is essential to life and godliness will be found in the Word of God." I ask, then, What is the use of anything else? Why add to the Bible, or take from it? Why not take it as it is? We believe this to be true and right. Then, let us stick to this truth and declare it to the world."

So do we still believe and practice this? And do we still have the love of God working in us? If so, the scripture instructs us:

"Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away." ~ 1 Corinthians 13:8-10

Charity, or the divine love of God, is a principle that never changes. That is why "Charity never faileth."

But no minister has a perfect understanding in the gospel. If this offends you, reread the scripture above again, and also consider the words of the Apostle Paul below.

"Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus." ~ Philippians 3:12

Imperfect understanding does not create unhealable problems. It is the attitude of people towards imperfect understanding that creates the problem. We need to learn the difference between a perfect heart of love towards God, and imperfect understanding. The love will enable us to be corrected of any need, and enable us to long suffer with imperfect understandings of another that is truly saved and sincere.

The principles of the gospel that never change, have to do with the heart. These principles become the law of the New Testament written in our hearts.

- "Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another. In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel." ~ Romans 2:15-16
- "Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart." ~ 2 Corinthians 3:3

In order to rightly divide the truth, we must also understand the difference between the unchangeable principles of the gospel, and the context of the original text.

“Of these things put them in remembrance, charging them before the Lord that they strive not about words to no profit, but to the subverting of the hearers. Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” ~ 2 Timothy 2:14-15

So how do you rightly divide the truth? Did you ever insert an opinion, or use a text of scripture, without thoroughly understanding the gospel principle behind it? When we focus on the principle, we will stop striving over the words, and with each other.

When the context of our current situation changes, the unchangeable principle still applies. But, the “literal” specificity of the exact text directive may not. (Note that this is actually related to ministerial guidance that can change according to the need.)

When the Apostle Paul started out establishing new congregations amongst the gentiles, he only had the Old Testament scriptures, and the words of Christ as he had received them from the apostles and disciples. He did not teach the Old Testament Law, but rather the principles behind the Law.

“But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter.” ~ Romans 7:6

The Spirit of God, is God, so he can only administer by his unchangeable self, through unchangeable principles. And this is the principle part of himself he places within our hearts, especially when he sanctifies us and fills us with himself: his Holy Spirit.

So you will find that in all of the Apostle Paul's Epistles, in the directives he writes, he almost always explains the principle behind it. It is the principle that endures unchanged forever. But the text of the directive must be understood in its original context of the past, if it is to be properly applied to the present context. Otherwise, if you try to apply the literal text, you may end up violating the principle that is behind the text of the original directive (or violate some other principle of the gospel.)

This is why we must pray for the Spirit's direction, so we don't violate the principle by taking “the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God” into our own hands. We must keep the Word of God in the hands of the Holy Spirit, by prayer, submission, and carefully avoiding violating the principles.

A very obvious example we understand well today is that the Holy Spirit can use a woman to teach and preach. I know of a woman who totally broke the ground of truth in an overseas country. She both taught and instructed many, even other male pastors. Does the scripture agree with this?

- “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” ~ 1 Timothy 2:11-12
- “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.”

At first “text appearance” it would appear Paul had established a new law that would even correct God for using the prophetesses Deborah and Huldah in the Old Testament. But God does not need any correction!

Certainly Paul was dealing with some serious problems being caused by certain women in certain places. And to understand how to apply these scriptures today, let us first separate out and look at the principles found in the text in these scriptures.

- “...subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man.”
- “but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.”

Subjection, not usurping authority, and being obedient, are principles that never change.

The woman should show submission and obedience to authority, and also towards her husband. Not as a slave, or under a dictator. But as a partner at his side in love, (see also Ephesians 5:22-33) as they both love, labor, and care for one another. Why? Because these scriptures must not violate any other unchangeable principles! In addition, we are all to be in subjection to one another by being clothed with humility (which is another unchangeable gospel principle).

The New Testament also has specific examples where women were used to instruct men: the daughters of Philip the evangelist that did prophesy, and in Ephesus where there was both a man and a woman who instructed another preacher in the gospel.

“And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.” - Acts 18:26

So today, most of us know how to implement these new testament scriptures concerning women. I know of many good Holy Spirit filled women who teach and instruct classes, and even pastor whole congregations. And many people have been saved because of their ministry. If the Holy Ghost is pleased to anoint and use these sisters, how can we find fault with God? Many of us today are already following the principles that allow for these sisters to be used, so we are not following the letter or the specificity of certain New Testament texts.

So let's be totally honest with ourselves. Do we know how to do this with other scriptures? Maybe we need to go back and take a closer look at the principle behind the teachings of other scriptures in order to check ourselves. We should never try to administer a scripture to the present need, by just using some past course of direction. Let us first be sure we understand the principle behind the scripture, and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us.

What about other scriptural directives relating to clothing and how we adorn ourselves? Too often the local ministerial guidance concerning these things has been an unnecessary point of contention, creating uneasiness and at times even division.

“In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array” ~ 1 Timothy 2:9

So let's first look at the principles here:

- Modesty - dealing with the covering of nakedness, and that we should not proudly try to make ourselves better than another by the “specialness” or the fanciness of our clothing or adornment.
- Shamefacedness and sobriety - reverence and respect, with self control

So now, there are no scriptural specific dictates of exact types, styles, or colors of clothing in the Bible related to women's clothing. (Except a guideline in the Old Testament where we are instructed that a man should

dress like a man, and a woman like a woman, and that it should be discernibly different). So the only thing to go by is what is necessary and works well for each local congregation, and in each local culture, to keep themselves modest and humble. The local administration provides guidance in this, and as long as people are still living holy, every other congregation everywhere in the world should be fine with that congregation. Especially if the women are behaving themselves with reverence and respect, and with self control.

In Acts 15 we have a perfect example in different ways that gospel directives can be given to two drastically different cultures within the church: the Jews and the gentiles. And so in Acts 15, when the Apostles and elders considered what should be required of the many cultures of the gentiles of their time, the Holy Spirit showed them they should only require what was NECESSARY to keep the gentiles holy, and to keep them in unity with their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters.

“For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things” ~ Acts 15:28

And so they reduced the requirements from the 600+ dictates of the Jewish Law and culture, down to four requirements. Oh, if only everyone could see this great wisdom they had from the Holy Spirit! Because with this wisdom, they delivered a severe blow to paganism, and many souls responded to the gospel and were saved!

What is fascinating about the directive given for the gentiles in Acts 15, is that the directive did not include a description of the underlying principles. The actual letter to the gentiles was written as follows:

“...The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. 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. Fare ye well.” ~ Acts 15:23-29

To us today, some of these directives in the letter pertaining to “meats offered to idols, from blood, and things strangled” may seem a little strange. But they were important for the gentiles of that age and time, and there were important principles (or critical reasons) why these directives were given. The reasons were not fully written out in the letter, but they can be obtained from the original discussion within the rest of Acts 15 and other Epistles.

1. The Apostles and disciples were concerned that the gentiles keep themselves separate from pagan forms of worship, lest they become too familiar and easily fall back into the same sinful things the pagans do, and become unfaithful to Christ.
2. There were many Jews (both Christian and non-Christian) in many cities of the gentiles: “For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day.” (Acts 15:21) The Apostles and disciples were concerned that “meats offered to idols, from blood, and things strangled” would offend the Jews and cause a division within the church.

The Apostle Paul was personally there at the meeting in Acts 15. He perfectly understood the principles under the directives in the letter to the gentiles, and he was asked to deliver that letter. Consequently in Romans 14:1 - 15:3 and in 1 Cor 8:1 - 10:33 the Apostle Paul extensively deals with the principles and the reasons for these directives, and carefully explains that things sacrificed to idols (by strangling, blood, or otherwise) actually are not unclean in of themselves. It is the association with pagan practices, and the offending of their brothers, that they need to be concerned with. If you are not partaking in a pagan practice nor offending your brothers, feel free to eat all things.

This example of Acts 15 and the later explanations given by the Apostle Paul in Romans 14:1 - 15:3 and in 1 Cor 8:1 - 10:33, show us an actual documented example within the scriptures to help us understand the difference between unchangeable principles of the gospel, and a specific directive for a specific need. The unchangeable principles of this example can be summarized as:

1. Don't be part of a false fellowship based on pagan worship.
2. Don't use your liberty in the gospel to offend another brother's conscience.

These principles still apply today, because they are unchangeable.

Seems simple enough and practical when we leave it at a principle level and allow the Holy Spirit to guide each local minister in its implementation, according to the local need.

Do we have a problem leaving these things in the hands of the Holy Spirit? If we don't leave them in the Holy Spirit's hands, we will end up having problems with each other.

My hope is that this article has helped us to understand the parts of the gospel that are unchangeable, and the differences in the practice of the gospel that will change depending upon what the needs are.

Brother Richard Lehman