

Analytical, Exegetical & Teaching Outlines

The Bible is a fascinating and unique book, but how are we to interpret and understand it? So often we can identify with the Ethiopian eunuch who had trouble understanding the prophet Isaiah (Acts 8). We have probably all heard sermons that are just a collection of seemingly random thought on a single verse, or attended Bible Studies in which a verse is read followed by the general question “What do you think this means?” or “What does it mean to you?” They leave us dissatisfied because we are none the wiser about what the text really means or why it is still relevant today.

It is easy to think that successful Bible Study is beyond the reach of the average lay person. Some give up in despair, while others rely on the commentaries, repeating the commentators parrot-fashion. But commentaries are not very effective in getting the word to “dwell in us richly” (Col 3:16). The word will dwell in us most richly when we have put it there through our own study and then, aided by God’s Spirit, reflect on it. Remember that God has placed His own Bible Interpreter within each one of us—His Holy Spirit.

Exegesis (from the Greek ἐξάγω, *exagō*, to lead out, bring out) is the technical name given to the search for the intended meaning of the text for those to whom God originally gave it. This might seem a daunting task to those without theological degrees, proficiency in the original languages, a broad historical knowledge, and a large library, but intelligent exegesis is possible for the amateur layman. “The key to good exegesis...is to learn to read the text carefully and to ask the right questions of the text.”¹

At PBC many people have been taught a method that helps them to read the text carefully and to ask the right questions. This is the method of preparing analytical, exegetical and teaching outlines.

I. THE ANALYTICAL OUTLINE

The analytical outline is a grammatical outline of the passage in which the text is arranged in such a way that the grammatical relationship and progression of the passage is easily seen. An AO is only a tool to help you read the text carefully and ask the right questions. There are no right or wrong ways to make an outline. No two people will produce exactly the same outlines. It is more important that the outline help you than that it be like the one prepared by the person next to you.

You will find it easiest if you use the NASB as your text. Although other translations may be more suitable for general devotional reading, the NASB is the most suitable for study because it remains closer to the Hebrew and Greek text.

Here are some guidelines for preparing an analytical outline.

A. Divide the text into paragraphs.

A paragraph is a distinct grammatical entity that has internal cohesion and progression in its thought flow, while a paragraph break marks some form of break or transition in this thought flow. So, work on one paragraph at a time and expect to find a thought flow in it. Most of Ephesians can be readily broken down into paragraphs. If you compare English translations that insert headings at major subdivisions there is little disagreement about the position of these breaks. In several cases this is because Paul uses an extremely long sentence that forms an entire paragraph. Examples of these long, complex sentences are 1:3-14 and 3:1-12.

The section of the book where it does become difficult is 4:1–5:21 in which it is not clear exactly where to insert subdivisions. Furthermore, there is disagreement about whether to place 5:21 with what precedes or with what follows. NASB and NIV start a new section after 5:21, but the two standard Greek texts (UBS Third Edition and Nestle-Aland 26th Edition) place 5:21 with 5:22.

¹ Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 23.

B. Place the main clause and any direct commands at the left margin.

Do this even when the main clause is not until several verses into the passage. For example, there are three main verbs in 2:1-7, but they do not occur until vv. 5-6: “made alive with,” “raised up with,” and “seated with.” In this case, subclauses are indented above the main clause.

C. Put dependent words under words they modify

These dependent words are either clauses (a group of words with a verb) or phrases (a group of words without a verb). It is usually easy to identify a dependent clause or phrase as it often begins with a conjunction (for, but, because, that), with a relative pronoun (who, which), with a preposition (with, by), *etc.* It can be more difficult to identify the word which that clause or phrase modifies.

D. Arrange parallel phrases in parallel

Although the NT is written in Greek, the Hebrew heritage of the authors shows through on many occasions. A distinctive hallmark of Hebrew literature is its use of parallelism, of which we find an example in Eph 2:21-22.

*in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord;
in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit;*

The normal analytical arrangement of clauses would have masked the parallelism of these two verses.

II. THE EXEGETICAL OUTLINE

An exegetical outline traces the thought-flow of the passage. If the analytical outline is fluid and no two people will develop exactly the same outline, the EO is even more so. Not only will you not develop the same outline as the person next to you, you will not develop the same outline a month or a year from now. A successful EO should follow some general guidelines, but there is even less a correct EO than a correct AO.

A. Look for repeated words and phrases

In constructing the AO you will already have read the text many times. Continue to read the text over and over, looking for repeated words or phrases. When you find them, mark them on your AO. If you are preparing your outline on a computer, it is easy to use bold face, italics, underlining, and small capitals to highlight such repetition. So, for example, we find in 1:3-14 a three-fold refrain to the praise of His glory, a much-repeated emphasis on the phrase *in Christ, in whom*, and *in Him*, and a play on the first (WE) and second (YOU) person in the last four verses. Such repetition suggests that the author is emphasizing a point.

B. Ask questions and make observations

As you read through the text, do so with a questioning mind. Why does the author repeat himself? Why does he change the subject so abruptly? Is there a particular need or problem that causes him to write the way he is doing? Keep a sheet of paper beside you on which to write these questions. Don't worry if you don't have answers right away: it is more important that you ask the questions than that you answer them because the questions will set your mind thinking.

On your sheet of paper also write down any observations that come to you. It may be another passage of Scripture that comes to mind, or an observation about contemporary life, or a quote from a book that you remember. Again, these observations will help stimulate your thought process.

C. Trace the thought flow of the passage

Use the following steps to develop the exegetical outline detailing the thought-flow of the passage.

1. *Pick a title.* Search for a title that captures the thought-flow of the passage. It should be neither so general that it fails to distinguish the passage from others, nor so specific that it fails to cover the whole passage.
2. *Identify the subsections.* The subsections of the passage will often be fairly obvious from the analytical outline, e.g., the AO shows several clauses arranged underneath a main verb or noun.
3. *Choose subheadings.* The subtitles should relate to the title.

D. Reflect

The task of preparing these outlines has hopefully fulfilled for you both of Fee & Stuart's keys of good exegesis, forcing you to read the text carefully and to ask questions of it. You will probably find that you now know the text more or less by heart, without having followed any plan of Scripture memorization! Now that the text is implanted in your mind, reflect on it as you go about your everyday life. Through your work, your reading, your interaction with people, you should find your understanding of the passage growing. You may suddenly realize that your outline is all wrong, and that another, better one falls into place in your mind.

Do not hurry this stage of reflection. It is my conviction that this is the most important stage, and the most frequently skipped. Don't skip this stage, nor try to hurry the process by jumping straight to this stage: you cannot reflect upon a passage without first laying that passage up in your mind.

III. THE TEACHING OUTLINE

The teaching outline is developed from the exegetical outline. By keeping the EO at the heart of the teaching outline, one ensures that the teaching is accurate to the text. But the EO is not sufficient. To it must be added an introduction, illustrations, implications and a conclusion.

A. Introduction

This should grab the attention of the audience and set them thinking. To this end it helps if the introduction plays off some event in current affairs about which people are already thinking and talking. The introduction should then include a transition that draws the audience back into the time frame of the passage under study.

B. Illustrations

Jesus well knew that we tend to remember stories far better than straight teaching. Old Testament faith was rooted in a story not in a doctrinal statement. It is the same today: many will forget most of the teaching but remember the stories. We need to ensure that these stories are of the type that will bear fruit in their thinking.

C. Implications

Although each passage of the Bible was written in and addressed to a particular historical and cultural milieu, since it is God's eternal word to man, it contains timeless spiritual principles that never go out of date. From these spiritual principles can be drawn implications for our life today. The successful identification of these implications requires an unhurried stage of reflecting on the passage.

D. Conclusion

A successful conclusion not only draws the passage together but also puts closure to the introduction.