

An Easy Model for Doing Bible Exegesis: A Guide for Inexperienced Leaders and Teachers **By Bob Young**

Introduction

This booklet is written for the Bible student who is just beginning to learn the process for developing classes, lessons, or sermons. Those who do not have much experience in this task will also benefit. As indicated in the title, a primary group to whom this booklet is directed is new leaders and teachers in local churches. It is hoped that this study will be helpful in the development of additional leaders and teachers, and that new leaders will develop confidence in their presentations by using this guide.

How does one use the Bible to develop a lesson? How does one decide what is the message of a text? This booklet sets forth an understandable, simple process.

Good biblical exegesis requires the correct application of principles of hermeneutics (interpretation), to a specific text or passage, with the purpose of understanding the author's meaning and message. A good sermon or lesson should accurately reflect the text and make valid applications. Therefore, exegesis is the first step toward a good lesson or sermon. Only when a Bible passage has been studied and correctly analyzed can one determine how to present and apply the text with a valid contemporary application. Exegesis and application—these are two basic components in developing a good sermon or class. Hermeneutics is a \$5 word for interpretation. It is an extensive area of study, but in its simplest use, interpretation is what happens when one moves from valid exegesis to application.

To describe exegesis does not say how it is done. Understanding hermeneutics is of little value unless the principles are applied in a valid process of exegesis. How does one go about the task of exegesis? What are the steps? What are the essential areas of concern? To answer such questions is the purpose of this booklet.

Exegesis

Exegesis comes from two Greek roots. "Ek" or "ex" means "out of." The other part of the word comes from the Greek word, ago, which means to lead. Exegesis is a process of leading out of the text a valid understanding. An opposite word is "eisegesis" which means to read into the text. Eisegesis is often a problem when one begins at the end rather than the beginning. Many beginning teachers and preachers, in their eagerness to say something helpful, begin with what they want to say rather than what the text says.

It is not wrong to have a goal or purpose in mind. Every church has needs. Exegesis is how one decides to use one text of another. Exegesis keeps the teacher from forcing an application. A favorite university professor in my undergraduate Bible studies often said, "You have the right doctrine or teaching but the wrong verse."

Exegesis can be an overwhelming task. Much of what has been written is very complex and to follow the steps in the process that is often described in Bible study resource books requires a

tremendous amount of time. For this reason, in this booklet the focus is on what I refer to as minor exegesis. This term must be defined.

Major exegesis is the work of the scholar, academic professor, or preacher who has the skills and tools available to thoroughly search out a passage in the complete process that is often described as exegesis. Minor exegesis is a simpler, less concentrated work, in which a Christian leader or teacher studies a passage knowing that the time available to invest in preparation is limited. The same areas of work are involved. The difference is how one works in certain areas and how extensively the work is done. To understand and apply the steps in minor exegesis puts good, solid textual studies within reach of the Christian leader who is pressured with many other responsibilities, often including full-time work outside the church.

Exegesis is an essential step toward good expository preaching and good class teaching. Because of the time required, many leaders who are charged with teaching and preaching take what appears to be an easier route and present topical or thematic studies. It is probably easier to “fake it” with topical studies, but the truth is that good topical studies take as much or more time than good textual studies. The result of this all too common approach is that the church is starved spiritually and seldom dines on the word of God as it was originally written and intended to be heard. The booklet is designed to build confidence in the Christian leader who wants to present the word of God in a healthy, spiritually formative way to grow the church. Such committed leaders can do exegesis!

A good exegesis should include the following to some extent: adequate independent preliminary reading and study, textual analysis, historical and cultural background analysis, structural analysis, grammatical analysis, lexical analysis, contextual analysis, theological analysis, and synthesis.

Allow me some suggestions about how a less experienced Bible study can approach this process.

Preliminary Reading and Study

The first step, before consulting commentaries, other sermons, and various Bible study tools, is to familiarize yourself with the passage—the content and the context. Context includes the immediate context and the more distant context. I like to describe the narrower context and the wider context. The narrow context includes at least a paragraph, probably a chapter and possibly an entire book. Examples of the wider context might be the entire book in which the passage occurs, or other writings from the same author.

Several things should be accomplished in your preliminary reading and analysis. You should determine the extent of the passage to be studied or preached, that is, where it begins and where it ends. One should decide the main theme of the text to be preached, and identify the principal sections and subsections. (Some call this structural analysis, but here I am describing it as reading and paragraphing, since technically the term structural analysis often refers to syntax—how the sentences and words are put together.)

Textual Analysis

[Note: this is a step that can be passed over by those who do not have the tools or understanding to do it, but for those who grasp the concepts below, it is an important step. This step is easily done, in fact it is the least time consuming of all the steps described.]

In a Greek New Testament, one can determine whether there are textual problems in a specific verse or section of the Bible by using the apparatus at the bottom of the page. Many study Bibles also note the most important textual problems. It is not necessary to determine the best options for every variant in the original text, but one should be aware of words and verses that are not well supported in the manuscripts. One does not want to preach an entire sermon on a text that is in doubt! (Bruce Metzger's *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* is a good tool.) Unless you have a high level of Bible training, you will have to depend on the work done by the scholars in this step.

Do not let this step frighten you or overwhelm you. Most of the time, you will not find any problems in the textual analysis, but it is important (or at least helpful) that the teacher or preacher be aware that such questions exist. There may be those in the class or audience who will ask you about these things because they have heard another teacher or preacher mention these things!

Historical and Cultural Backgrounds

The academician and professional study of the Bible will probably spend a lot of time reading encyclopedias, primary historical works, and reference works to understand the important historical and cultural factors. An adequate approach for the average church leader or teacher who has to prepare a class or sermon quickly is simply to note in the passage historical references (author, recipients, dates, locations, historical personalities, and events). One should also note references to cultural practices and customs. Use the Bible study tools at your disposal—commentaries, encyclopedias, study Bibles, etc.—to study and understand these factors and to determine their importance for your class or sermon.

As you teach and preach more frequently, and especially if you teach a Bible class by working through a book of the Bible rather than by teaching individual, isolated passages, you will find that much of this work is done once and does not have to be repeated each week.

You will have the same experience if you teach or preach regularly. You will find yourself blessed by the study you have done in the past and will be able to apply what you have learned in the past in the classes or sermons you are currently preparing.

Looking at the Text—Structure, Grammar, Vocabulary

Structural Analysis. Many of us have heard the special terms that describe various aspects of textual study, but may not understand exactly what is meant. Sometimes the three concepts I have included in the heading are described with unfamiliar words. Structure is often called syntax. Syntax is a specialized word for how words and phrases are put together or arranged to create sentences in a language. It is ideal to analyze syntax in the original language, but when that is impossible, the student should analyze the structure of the text in the language he or she knows. In every language, there are rules for how this should be done and what certain constructions mean.

Analyzing the structure will involve identifying the main sentence or clause, and any subordinate clauses. How do the concepts presented in the passage relate to one another? Analyzing structure will help you determine what the passage is saying. Many times, it will also suggest the main points of the sermon or class and some of the sub-points.

Analyzing grammar. Grammar and syntax overlap and cannot be perfectly distinguished. Grammar generally includes sentence structure, but also studies how words change their forms (morphology), sounds, and sometimes their meanings (semantics), based on context and use in a sentence. Words sometimes change based on the words around them and the relationship they have to the other words. Morphology is the study of word forms; semantics is the study of word meanings.

Analyzing vocabulary. Lexical study is the study of words. It has several dimensions, but in this booklet, lexical study deals primarily with the vocabulary of the passage. What are the key words in the passage? What words or concepts are repeated? Are the words used in the same way in this passage as in other biblical texts? A concordance will help you find other occurrences of a word. You can use good lexicons and word study books to understand the basic uses and meanings of Bible words.

All of the areas mentioned above can be included in a broad, general area called linguistics.

Contextual analysis

Contextual analysis asks how the biblical section to be preached or taught fits into or contributes to the larger message or to the theology of the author. It includes the process of looking at the most helpful parallel passages and verses (not necessarily all of them) to discover how the texts relate to one another and how they provide insights. Parallel passages should be worked through exegetically to make certain that conclusions are valid. (The need to work through multiple passages exegetically in the preparation of a topical sermon is a major factor in the increased time required to do such a study correctly and well.) Be aware that a biblical concept or doctrine may be present in a passage even when a specific word is not used. For example, a concordance search for sacrifice may not help you find verses that include references to propitiation or expiation, even though such verses can be helpful in a study of sacrifice.

Theological Analysis

Before moving to what we usually call interpretation or application and the actual preparation of the class or sermon, it will be good to try to state what the passage teaches about various areas of theology—God, Christ, Holy Spirit, humanity, salvation, sin, church, last things, etc. Of course, not every passage will say something about every theological area. But it is also possible that you may find unexpected theological concepts in some texts where you had not seen them before!

Depending on the time and skill of the teacher or preacher, this may include thinking about the primary theological emphasis of the author

Putting it all together—using your work

My suggestion is that you write a brief statement that summarizes the passage in light of the various steps in the exegetical process. This is not a running commentary. It should reflect the structure you discovered, show the development of thought within the passage, and show relationships within the text in light of your other studies.

Application

A good understanding of the text is the first step toward asking what it means today. An often repeated saying is, “A text cannot mean now what it did not mean then.” The principal idea reflected in this statement is that the purpose of the original author should inform our use of the text today.

I can think of exceptions, especially in the narrative or historical sections of the Bible. We can teach and preach such sections of Scripture, drawing conclusions and contemporary lessons that may not reflect the intent of the original author. Dr. Stafford North categorizes such sermons as Expository II. An example will help clarify this point. Consider the text of Acts 2. What was Luke’s purpose in writing Acts, or in writing Luke-Acts? Multiple ideas have been advanced including historical, apologetic, and faith-development. Can I preach this text to call attention to some of the characteristics and practices of the early church? Is that a legitimate use of the text? I think it is, but such a sermon probably does not reflect Luke’s purpose in writing to Theophilus. That is, Luke did not write to Theophilus to tell him what the early church was like.

Conclusion

Once you have completed a minor exegesis of the text, you will be better able to determine how best to communicate the teachings of the passage to God’s people in today’s world. This is interpretation, and is unique to each individual. Give 10 preachers the same text, let them use the same exegetical process, and you will likely get 10 different sermons—unless they copy from one another or from a common source!

[For help in using your exegetical work to develop the sermon, see my booklet, *How to Move from the Text to the Sermon.*]