﻿**Chapter 7**

**Homiletical Analysis**

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*Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching*

Exegesis is never an end in itself. Its purposes are never fully realized until it begins to take into account the problems of transferring what has been learned from the text over to the waiting Church. To put it more bluntly, exegesis must come to terms with the audience as well as with what the author meant by the words he used.

Traditionally this is the very place where theological education has failed in its program. None of the theological departments has been specifically charged with assisting the student in the most delicate maneuver of transferring the results of the syntactical-theological analysis of the text into a viable didactic or sermonic ﻿format. In fact, everyone has assumed that this is so very obvious to anyone who has spent hours analyzing the Biblical text, that it would be a work of supererogation to even delve into the matter at all!

It is our new contention here that we must now charge this duty to the department of exegesis. The reason we have chosen this department is that the exegetical process and the hermeneutical circle have not been closed or completed until the exegete comes to terms with his own and his intended audience’s response to the text.

Recently this point has been felt to be so intrinsic to the whole interpretive process that modern hermeneutical theory has cared less (and sometimes, not at all) about what a text mean t when it was written than what it mean s to us today. This turn of events was traced in chapter 1. While we were critical, we also said that we have heard—loud and clear—what lies behind this turn of events. What good, indeed, is it to know something happened or was said unless it has some relationship to me the reader or listener? The point is well taken.

From our viewpoint, it is to be regretted that modern men and women have also decided that they can do just as well without a decision on whether the author actually wrote what is found in the text or whether the events described really happened. It is almost as if modern men and women have grown tired of waiting for the exegetes and have summarily changed the ground rules so that finally something relevant and of personal value can come from the texts.

If we are not mistaken, for every move in the exegetical process, as we have ﻿attempted to trace it up to this final step, there is a matching function in what we are calling here homiletical analysis. This is not to say that we are now attempting to rival or to supplant the discipline of homiletics; that would be a total misunderstanding of our proposal here. To be absolutely clear about what we are doing in this chapter, we might have entitled it “Preparations for Homiletical Usage.” The basic thrust of the chapter will be what we call “principlization,” the final task in the exegetical process before a text can be turned over to the special concerns of the department of pastoral theology and homiletics.

﻿In those happy instances where the Biblical materials are cast into a straight didactic form, such as the exegete finds in much of the Book of Romans, there is hardly any need for what we are here calling “principlization.” There the problem is relatively simple, in that the only demand on the exegete is that he put the teachings and doctrines of Romans into the form of propositions (i.e., main points in a preaching outline) that will call the hearers to some type of response. When truth is not internalized within the hearers, but is left as just so many notions floating around outside their experience, the exegete is in effect a mere dilettante—a trifler in the art of interpretation.

﻿But most texts are not cast into a straight didactic form. The problems in each of these instances are far more complex. As we have already seen, it ought to be possible for the interpreter to summarize in a brief sentence the meaning of each paragraph in the portion of Scripture on which he has chosen to preach. (This preaching portion will usually be limited to two or three paragraphs, a total of eight to fifteen verses.) The interpreter must make sure that his ﻿focus is identical with the author’s truth-intention. And accordingly, it will be proper to designate the brief sentence summarizing the paragraph as the author’s theme sentence/proposition.

﻿The theme sentence/proposition should give the essence of what the paragraph is about. The only situation in which this process could become troublesome and complicated is in those rare instances (1) where the theme is implied or (2) where independent sentences are connected to the expressed topic sentence of the paragraph (in effect a compound theme). In case (1) it will be necessary to propose a theme; in case (2) it will be necessary to enlarge the theme proposition to include those attached independent clauses which rank on an equal basis with the so-called topic sentence.

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﻿Now we are ready to begin the process of principlizing these themes. To put it most succinctly, in formulating the main points of his message the exegete must restate these ﻿paragraph themes without diluting or expanding their content. Furthermore, these restatements must simultaneously embrace the author’s purpose in writing the whole section and the timeless and abiding truth he intended to convey in each paragraph.

﻿It is of utmost importance that the restated theme not be a purely descriptive narration of the past events. This will immediately prejudice moderns against giving it their attention. Thus, it is imperative that each main point (one per paragraph please, unless the scope of our exegesis and message is only one paragraph) avoid the use of the past tense of the verb (a reporting style) and the use of all proper names (with the understandable exception of God’s names). ﻿

The exegete’s eye will be drawn from the author’s overall purpose to his manner of carrying it out in the paragraphs being examined. This in turn will raise the question, what did the first speaker (i.e., the author) of these words expect from his audience when they first heard these words? With this in mind, let us define “principlization.” To “principlize” is to state the author’s propositions, arguments, narrations, and illustrations in timeless abiding truths ﻿with special focus on the application of those truths to the current needs of the Church. Contemporary applications will often be suggested by analogous applications made by the original writer of the Biblical text. The remainder of this chapter will focus on the various steps to be followed in principlizing a passage.

﻿**The Subject of the Text**

The first step in the process of principlization is to determine the subject of the Biblical passage (and hence of the message to be preached). It should reflect the major concern of the ancient writer. It is best if that concern can be described in a way that shows how that same concern is shared by most, if not all, of humanity. ﻿

In order to accurately describe what the subject of a passage is, the exegete must now back up and ask once again what the Biblical book as a whole is all about. That Biblical book must be classified as to kind and subject matter.

﻿Then the major sections or parts of the Scriptural book should be studied once again to note what, if any, progress or development there is in the argument, narrative, or ﻿injunctions as the reader moves along. The whole scope of the work should be understood in relation to the contribution that the individual parts make. By analyzing the relationships that exist at this level, the interpreter may find solutions to some of his problems.

﻿But our concern as interpreters and proclaimers of the Word must be much more restricted if we are to do an intensive and detailed analysis of the text. As we have already suggested, pastors and teachers have almost uniformly experienced that one cannot do a good job of exegeting a passage of more than two or three paragraphs. Usually it is best to treat about six to eight verses when one is working with didactic material. If one is working in historical narrative, of course it will be easier and more practical to focus on a larger body of material (perhaps up to twenty or even thirty verses). Determination of the subject of this group of two or three paragraphs is the most critical move for the proclaimer, for it will in turn determine the subject of the pastor’s message.

﻿The exegete must resist the temptation to impose a mold over the text by forcing that text to answer one of his favorite questions or to deal with one of the contemporary ﻿issues that our culture wants to have solved. Instead, the careful interpreter will gather the following data to determine the subject that best fits the uniqueness of the passage under investigation: (1) the theme sentence or topic proposition of each of the paragraphs; (2) repeated terms which are defined, or are stressed, or give the text an unusual flavor; and (3) the special part that these paragraphs play in the overall theme or argument of the whole book and the section in which they are found.

﻿Some examples of this process might help. When the exegete undertakes an examination of a text like Isaiah 40:12–31, he or she is immediately struck by the division of the text into three major strophes (poetic paragraphs). Two of these strophes begin with virtually identical questions: “To whom then will you compare God, or what likeness will you make with him?” (Isa. 40:18, 25). It is this repeated question (and hence the theme or topic proposition) that supplies the exegete with the subject of the passage and therefore the topic of the message to contemporary men and women: “The Incomparability of God.”

﻿Other passages are a little more subtle in the way they ﻿yield up their topic and central subject matter. Take, for example, the historical narrative of Numbers 20:1–13, which deals with an incident that occurred during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. The issue for the Israelites was a lack of water. But the words that make a major difference and suddenly tip the whole narrative on its head, as it were, are the unexpected blasts from Moses’ lips: “Listen now, you rebels; must we [!] bring water for you out of this rock?” (Num. 20:10). These words are not repeated, nor are they key theological terms, but they are undoubtedly the pivotal words in this text. They immediately bring to mind the contrast between the words and actions of men and the words and actions of God—for water did pour forth from that rock in spite of what God’s leaders had done. Therefore, we believe the subject of this passage is and the topic of the message should be: “Letting God Be God.” Moses and Aaron robbed God of His glory by “speaking rashly,” as a later Psalm would editorialize on this event (Ps. 106:32–33).

﻿Once in a while the very words of the subject will be expressed in the body of the text itself. One example is Malachi 2:17–3:10. There, almost at the heart of the text ﻿and functioning much as a pivot or a fulcrum, is Malachi 3:6—“I the Lord do not change.” When this central assertion is juxtaposed with the charges that introduce the passage (“Where is the God of justice [anyhow]?”), the sermon subject naturally suggests itself: “A Call to Trust in Our Unchanging Lord.”

﻿The subject of a passage might also be suggested in the opening words or heading of a section. In Malachi 1:6–14, God asks of the Jews through His prophet, “If I am [your] father, where is my honor? And if I am [your] Lord, where is my fear?” (Mal. 1:6). And there is the point of the whole passage: “A Call to Authentic Sonship.” It is all too easy to claim that we are sons and servants of the living God without demonstrating the same! No other subject dominates these nine verses.

﻿When we have extracted the subject from the text instead of imposing a subject on it, we may speak with more confidence that the word we share for moderns has an authority which is not our own, but is borrowed from the text. We would urge exegetes to study (1) the theme sentences, (2) distinctive or unusual features of the passage, (3) pivotal statements that may act as a fulcrum ﻿for the passage, and (4) the opening words or headings that set the stage for all that the passage wishes to develop.

﻿The Emphasis of the Text

﻿The next step is to find the emphasis of the text under consideration. Within this selected passage there will be important words and key terms. These words and terms may be identified by frequent occurrence in the group of paragraphs being investigated. Or they may occupy a strategic position; for example, they may appear in the theme propositions. Or they may be explicitly defined. One other clue to recognizing these words is that they will usually give us trouble in our exegesis since they add special nuances to the passage.

﻿The original author’s leading concepts are sometimes marked by special vocabulary. In those cases where the text and its author have thus pointed to the concepts which they want to stress, it behooves the interpreter to follow this same pattern if he wishes to be a trustworthy exegete. Often, identification of this stress or emphasis will help the exegete to give a unity to his preparation of the ﻿passage for teaching or preaching.

﻿Whenever a series of sentences or clauses is linked together by the same introductory word (“because,” “since,” “therefore,” or the like), it may be possible to organize the message around these key words. [1] In this case each major point in the sermon will be a development of the subject from the same perspective and angle. For example, if the word therefore is sprinkled throughout the paragraphs under investigation, then we may safely make our major points in the sermon a discussion of the consequences of the announced subject. Alternatively, if the word because recurs frequently, we may develop our message around a series of reasons.

﻿One example that comes to mind is Isaiah 9:1–7. Here the repeated “for” (“because”) at the head of verses 4, 5, and 6 introduces the reasons why there is “joy to the world.” Another example is Isaiah 58. As it talks about true spirituality in dedicated social action, it balances “if” conditions ( אִם ) with “then” consequences ( אָז ).

﻿Sometimes the repeated phenomenon is only a point of grammar or syntax. Thus in I Thessalonians 4:1–8 the stress is on the three infinitival forms in verses 3b, 4a, and ﻿6a. They function almost like purpose clauses to develop the subject of “Knowing the Will of God” (I Thess. 4:3a). Or in I Peter 1:1–12, the Greek form εἰς (“unto, to”) is used in verses 3b, 4a, and 5b to indicate all the things into which believers have been “born anew.”

﻿Time and again the exegete may be saved from would-be disaster and the perils of subjectivism by relying on the text’s own pattern of emphasis as it is often indicated by some stylistic, grammatical, or rhetorical device that supplies the authoritative basis for principlizing that text. Where such emphases in words, terms, stylistics, rhetorical devices, or even repeated grammatical forms are lacking, the interpreter must rely on other factors to guide him in the principlizing or application stage.

﻿**The Main Points of the Message**

Now we can begin to determine the main points of our lesson or message. In this step, it will be most advantageous if the interpreter has already laid out a syntactical display or block diagram such as was discussed in chapter 4.

The advantages of analyzing each paragraph or strophe ﻿in a mechanical display that concentrates on tracing the syntactical connections between sentences, clauses, and phrases are enormous. The most important is that the theme proposition or topic sentence (even if it is only implicit) plainly declares what that particular paragraph or strophe is all about. When the two or three propositions or topic sentences (if our selected text includes that many paragraphs) are studied together, the exegete must ask, “What do these propositions have in common? How can these propositions or topic sentences be stated so as to retain the perspective and stance adopted as a result of the first two steps in the process of principlization—determination and investigation of the subject and key words?”

﻿We are saying only that the exegete, teacher, and preacher must locate the important sentences in each targeted text. Usually there will be only one such sentence for each paragraph. It will be the theme proposition or what we have also designated as the topic sentence of the paragraph.

﻿It will be from these sentences that the interpreter will build the main points of the message or lesson. This will be ﻿best accomplished by weighing each topic sentence against the author’s major concern in the whole text under scrutiny (see again chapter 3, pp. 69–85; and pp. 152–55). Armed with this perspective, the interpreter should begin to see a way in which these topic sentences can be formulated into major points which will not only preserve the precise meaning of the original text, but will also provide an invitation, challenge, and instruction to moderns.

﻿The main pitfall to avoid in formulating these main points of the message is that of using dated statements. The tendency is to merely transfer from the text all proper names, places, incidents, and descriptions. This of course immediately makes more difficult a modern audience’s efforts to hear God’s “new” word to their generation from an admittedly old text. Therefore, the teacher or preacher will be well advised to delete all proper names from his main points (except for God’s names). Likewise, anything that would tend to focus the listeners’ attention more on the “thenness” of the text than on the “now” of God’s new challenge must be studiously avoided. At the same time each proposition must be so worded as to preserve the ﻿abiding, permanent, and fixed teaching of the text.

﻿For example, if one were to preach on Numbers 22, his main points might easily be a historicized narration of just passing interest without any contemporary challenge:

1. Balaam Sought—Numbers 22:1–20
2. Balaam Fought—Numbers 22:21–27
3. Balaam Taught—Numbers 22:28–38

﻿This would be a fairly good message if we were preaching to Balaam, but can we expect God’s people today to respond to such a message? Instead we would suggest that there is a subject in the passage which is relevant to Balaam and to us in our day—the problem of “Knowing and Doing the Will of God.” There are three ways (our key word here) in which we can know and do the will of God:

1. ﻿By Keeping the Faith (“once for all delivered to the saints”)—Numbers 22:1–7 [the expositor should call attention to the informing theology of Gen. 12:3 and the relationship of Moab and Midian to Abraham]
2. By Obeying God’s Word—Numbers 22:8–22
3. By Observing the Obstacles—Numbers 22:23–35

﻿The same material has been expounded, but this time the message is relevant to all.

﻿It is also important to make sure that the main points are in a parallel structure—if one is a phrase, then all should be phrases instead of a single word or a sentence. If one is in the imperative form or an interrogative, then it is best that the others also follow suit. Likewise, nouns should correspond with nouns, verbs with verbs, and prepositions with prepositions. Thus, if the first point begins with a preposition, so should each of the other main points. It might also be noted that until the interpreter has acquired a wide range of experience, it might be best to let the main points follow the same order as the sequence in the paragraphs themselves.

﻿It is not always an easy matter to formulate these main points. Beside the few hints we have already given, there is the need for meditation and prayer. Beyond all the science of exegesis and hermeneutics there is another side which we may call the art of preparing a text for proclamation. Those who have few gifts in this creative and reflective area should follow the guidelines we have suggested above as a minimum. This procedure will not lead the interpreter ﻿away from what we call the art of preparing a text; rather it will put the proclaimer in the best possible position to do further reflection and meditation on the specifics of the text.

﻿**The Subpoints of the Message**

﻿Next to be considered are the subdivisions of the main points. Here we are involved with the logic and development of a lesson or message. And here is where the syntactical analysis of each paragraph should begin to pay handsome dividends.

﻿The method for extracting the subpoints or subdivisions of the main points ought to be the same in principle as the method used for formulating the main divisions. In fact, the indentations and levels of subordination indicated in the syntactical analysis for each paragraph ought to help us decide which phrases, clauses, or even sentences are to be chosen for highlighting in the subpoints. Only by paying careful attention to the grammar and syntax of the paragraph will our eyes and hearts be directed to follow the thread of the original writer’s intentions. And this is what we wish to reproduce in the lives of men and women.

﻿One caution must now be sounded. It is best to limit the number of subdivisions lest the outline tend to make the text seem more complex than it really is. The object ought to be to simplify the structure so as to provide to every listener an insight into the skeleton and linking sinews of the text.

﻿Like the main points, the subpoints must also be in parallel structure. Furthermore, for the sake of simplicity and for the convenience of those who are following the message (ideally, their Bibles should be open to the passage), it again is best to preserve the order of the text. Of course, when there are very good reasons, it is permissible to depart from this order; but this should be the exception. And it must be especially clear at all times just where the expositor is in the paragraph. He should frequently announce the verse(s) in the paragraph he is now examining and the subpoint to which it relates.

﻿The whole objective of what we are here calling “textual expository preaching” is to let the Scriptures have the major, if not the only, role in determining the shape, logic, and development of our message. We want to drive home into the hearts of God’s people the Scripture itself as well as ﻿the challenge, comfort, and instruction of the message. It is to be hoped that God’s men and women will be challenged to reread that very same Biblical text on their own soon after they have heard the message. Even if they cannot recall the outline (they probably will not—sorry!), that Word of Scripture will still speak to them because they have thought through its structure and shape in such a way as to have decisively met God in that text.

﻿We will want to develop our subpoints as the writer did. Thus we will have a list of reasons where he used a series of “because” clauses, or a list of conditions where he had a series of “if” clauses. Regardless of what particular textual device suggests to us the rubric for getting the subpoints in a parallel structure, syntax must lie at the basis of that decision.

﻿Teachers and students of exegesis must pay much more attention to syntax. Only by doing so will they be able to come to terms with what the author meant and only then will they be in a position to come to terms with the audience gathered to hear God’s Word. To help in this respect, we strongly urge interpreters to give serious consideration to the method of syntactical display (block ﻿diagrams) advocated in this book.

﻿**The Theology of the Text**

And now, where are we to find the essential substance of a passage? Or, to put it in another way, what is the permanent, abiding, and doctrinal part of the passage? Must we import doctrine and theology (from elsewhere in the Bible) to fill out the word we hope to teach and preach from the selected passage—especially if it is a narrative text, or an Old Testament passage?

﻿Many have noted that the strength of preachers who follow rather closely the pattern of preaching found in the Reformers is that they preach theologically. There is no doubt that when our teaching and preaching focus on the person and work of God, there are decided strengths and praiseworthy emphases.

﻿But even these strengths can be subverted when in our methodology we do not heed the Biblical author’s own theological motivations and presumptions—at least to the extent that he has explicitly referred to an antecedent theology which he believes he is building onto in this passage. It has been our contention in this work (see ﻿chapter 6) that the exegete is responsible for what we have called the “informing theology” or the “analogy of antecedent Scripture.” There are two tools we can employ to identify this theology: (1) the author’s own explicit references, allusions, and use of terms which in the progress of doctrine had taken on a technical status by his time; and (2) a good textbook of Biblical theology that traces the diachronic progress of the doctrine which is further developed in our preaching passage.

﻿This “emerging theology” must take precedence over the legitimate concerns of a systematic theology. Systematic statements are useful only when we have completed exegesis of a passage. Then, in our summaries of each main point, in the sermon outline, or in the whole passage, we may jump over the centuries and bring to bear all that God subsequently revealed on the theological issue being examined. In no case should a later doctrine be used as an exegetical tool to unlock an earlier passage. That would be an extremely serious methodological mistake, for, in effect, all revelation would then be leveled out. Virtually every passage dealing with a particular topic would end up saying almost the same thing as the latest revelation of ﻿God on that topic.

﻿The proper alternative to this abuse of systematic theology, however, is not to refuse to include any theology; rather, it is to let Biblical theology be the twin tool of syntactical analysis. As “emerging theology” wended its way through the history of redemption, there gradually developed a background against which the deeper or more spiritual emphases of God’s most recent revelation were to be understood. Far from imposing any tradition of a later theology (no matter how Biblical and how excellent it is) on an earlier text, this method respects the integrity of the original revelation of God to the writer. Yet it also legitimately enriches that same text by its emphasis on the accumulating, ramifying, and informing theology.

﻿If this was the theology which was central to the interest of the audiences in the writer’s day, then could it not also still function for us in the same way? If this informing theology was what made the text timeless and full of abiding values for the people in that day (and we believe that it was), then could not this same diachronic accumulation of theology provide the same heart of the message for all peoples in all times? Yes, for even in the ﻿text’s historical particularity, it also carried in its very bosom an enduring plan of the everlasting God.

We believe that this informing theology provides the interpreter with the key to all the emphases, applications, appeals, and offers of hope or warnings of judgment which must be made if the text is to mean anything to our day and age. It is for this reason that we have named our method of exegesis after the two most important functions in the exegetical process—the syntactical-theological method of exegesis. Without both of these emphases, the message will fall stillborn on baffled ears and hearts.

﻿**The Conclusion of the Message**

The last step in principlizing a passage is to give the message a strong conclusion. The messages of about two hundred years ago that remain in print excel in their ability to draw stirring conclusions. More recently, we have tended to specialize in emphasizing the introduction. In fact, we have usually overindulged ourselves in the art of introducing texts and messages. We have begun with references to the weekly newsmagazines, recent editorials, various opinion polls, and with quotes from prominent ﻿authors from the past. Meanwhile, much of our allotted time has been eaten up (sometimes up to one-fifth of it), and we still have not brought God’s people near to the text. It is almost as if we were afraid to cut that text loose on God’s people.

﻿We need to reevaluate our priorities in this matter of introductions. I would urge God’s ministers and teachers of the Word in every type of ministry inside and outside of the Church to severely limit their work on the introduction and to devote that time and those energies of preparation to an expanded and clearly-thought-out conclusion.

﻿Here again we believe the Biblical text itself will suggest what our conclusion might be. At least we ought to begin by asking where the author thought that God was leading the original audience who first heard this message. Usually that is all that we need to observe and the pattern for our own conclusion will be set.

﻿The reader must recognize that there is much more that needs to be done before he can master all the principles and achieve all the goals of good homiletical procedure. We believe that the departments of homiletics in the theological seminary should now take over and carry the ﻿student the rest of the way. This book has made an earnest attempt to be the friend of the pastor, teacher, and student along the uncharted and lonely path from exegesis over to the preparation of a sermon. We trust that it has provided an adequate definition and description of the detailed procedure that must be followed in this matter of principlizing a Biblical text for public proclamation of the Word.