
Goal of Exegesis – Grammatical Context⁴

A regular assignment in my exegesis classes is to have each student 1) read the passage carefully; 2) determine what the individual propositions are; 3) determine what the relationship between each proposition is; 4) write out each proposition on a separate line with an introductory word or phrase which expresses the relationship between that proposition and the preceding (or following) one; and 5) state the single idea which the author intends to communicate in this passage. The paper "How Propositions Relate to Each Other" is designed to initiate students into this habit. But why is it necessary?

In my opinion the goal of exegesis is to think an author's thoughts after him. Or, to put it another way, the goal is to be able to restate an author's original intention in such a way that if he were listening he would agree. The goal is to see reality through another person's eyes.

Good Exegesis Requires Humility

Good exegesis is therefore a very humbling task because it demands that our own ideas take second place. The way we feel or think about life is restrained as we allow ourselves to listen to what the author thinks. When we are exegeting the Scriptures the task is all the more humbling, because the Bible possesses an authority, which is absolute. If its ideas about God and his way conflict with our own, we are the ones who change, not the Scriptures. Thus good exegesis is threatening to human pride. For good exegesis runs the risk of discovering that the apostle Paul views life differently than I view it. If I hold his apostolic view to be authoritative, then my view my pride along with it, crumbles.

But then, can fallen creatures who proudly love our own glory ever do good exegesis? Will we not use every connivance to hide our ignorance? Will we not twist and distort the meaning of Scripture so that it always supports our own view and our own ego? Let's face it, this happens every day. But must it happen? I don't think so.

It is precisely at this point that I believe the Holy Spirit performs his part in the exegetical process for the reliant believer. He does not whisper in our ears the meaning of a text. He cares about the text, which he inspired, and does not short circuit the study of it. The primary work of the Holy Spirit in exegesis is to abolish the pride and arrogance in us that keep us from being open to the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit makes us teachable because he makes us humble. He causes us to rely wholly on the mercy of God in Christ for our happiness so that we are not threatened if one of our views is found to be wrong. The person who knows himself finite and unworthy and who thus rejoices in the mercy of God has nothing to lose when his ego is threatened.

The fruit of the Spirit is love. This is crucial for exegesis. Love "seeks not its own, is not puffed up;" on the contrary, love "rejoices in he truth." This is the mark of the good exegete: he seeks not his own, he seeks the truth. If the truth he finds conflicts with his own idea, he rejoices to have found the truth and humbly acknowledges that "his own" is wrong.

Therefore the Holy Spirit makes possible the exhilarating experience of growth, for only the open, humble mind truly grows in understanding. The proud mind is more interested in protecting itself than in expanding and correcting itself. It must therefore stay small. Arrogant people are always little people. Humble people look little but they are inheriting the

whole world. So while good exegesis is humbling, it is also tremendously enlarging. It reduces us to our true finiteness that we may see appropriately and enjoy the magnificent eternal truth revealed in the Scripture.

God Humbled Himself

God humbled himself not only in the incarnation of his Son, but also in the inspiration of the Scriptures. The manger and the cross were not sensational. Neither is grammar and syntax. But that is how God has chosen to reveal himself: a poor Jewish peasant and a prepositional phrase have this in common, that they are both human and ordinary. That the poor peasant was God and the prepositional phrase is the Word of God does not change this fact.

If God humbled himself to take on human flesh and to speak human language then woe to us if we arrogantly presume to ignore the humanity of Christ and the grammar of Scripture. If God has thought it necessary to stoop down and reveal the mystery of his will in Greek and Hebrew syntax, would we not then be presumptuous to seek that revelation apart from that syntax?

If God humbled himself to speak human language, is it surprising that he expects of us the humbling task - not only for the reasons already mentioned, but also because it requires such nitty-gritty, earthy work. None of us learned to read without much practice and many mistakes - all of which reveals our finiteness and fallibility. Good reading, or good exegesis, is simply an extension of the learning process that began when we were four years old. Then we struggled with "Sally's hair is curled." Now we struggle with "God so loved the world." Then we asked our mommy what "curled" means. Now we use concordances and commentaries.

There is no getting away from grammar and syntax. These are the language conventions that carry our intentions. If we do not understand an author's language conventions we cannot understand his meaning. If he says, "Jack hit the ball" we might think the ball hit Jack, unless we knew the English language convention that the subject comes before the verb and the direct object comes after. And it is not mere quibbling to be concerned about such things - it makes a great deal of difference to Jack whether he hit the ball or the ball hit him.

Therefore since God has spoken to us in a human language and since language communicates only when the reader knows the grammar and syntax, we must make every effort to deal with the Biblical text grammatically. Otherwise the voice of God will remain silent. Only modern day docetists, who scorn the incarnation, exalt themselves to the point where they think they have a hot line to heaven, which can ignore the flesh and bones of the Biblical text.

Propositions: Basic Building Blocks

The basic building block in language is a proposition. A proposition is the smallest unit of language, which makes an assertion about something. "Tangerines" is not a proposition. "I like tangerines" is a proposition. "Tangerines" is a word, and words are the

building blocks of thought. Our main concern in exegesis is to think an author's thoughts, so we are primarily concerned with propositions.

Our main task in understanding an author's thoughts is to determine how his propositions relate to each other. The clearer an author makes these relationships for us, the easier he is to understand. There are places, for example, in John's gospel which are extremely difficult to understand because the relationships between the propositions are only given with a simple "and". A literal translation of John 17:9c-11 reads:

17:9c because they are yours

10a and all mine are yours

10b and yours are mine

10c and I am glorified in them

11a and no longer am I in the world

11b and they themselves are in the world

11c and I am coming to you.

Here we have seven propositions joined by "and". But what are the logical relationships among the seven? The word "and" tells us very little about how Jesus or John conceived the relationships in these three verses. Notice how different the case is with a text from Paul. Romans 1:15-17 reads:

15 I am eager to preach the gospel to you also in Rome

16a for I am not ashamed of the gospel

16b for it is the power of God unto salvation . . .

17a for in it the righteousness of God is revealed. . .

This string of "fors" makes very plain the structure of Paul's thought: in the gospel God shows himself to be righteous (17a); this makes the gospel a powerful thing which leads to salvation, since there can only be salvation where God is righteous (16b); since the Gospel is the very power of God how silly it would be to be ashamed of it (16a); and since there can be no shame there is only eagerness to proclaim it, even in Rome (15). Verses 16-17 give, therefore, a clear and logical ground for Paul's enthusiastic desire to preach in Rome. Until this relationship between 1:15 and 1:16-17 is seen we have not fully understood Paul. We have not thought his thoughts.

Discourse Analysis (DA)⁵

Introduction

Most students of the Bible do not know how to read (= exegete) for understanding. Instead they merely read for information, gladly pouncing upon an author, holding him or her up with their well-trained eye, and then robbing the text of its conclusions. But although their minds become filled with many stolen treasures, they never fool anyone. Everyone knows they are thieves and can be exposed at any time with a good question. The owner's conclusions have merely become the thief's opinions. And such stealing is wrong, even when the opinions in view are biblical opinions.

Discourse analysis is designed to help us become "honest" readers who desire to understand rather than steal. The two best teachers I have ever had both taught me that to *understand* (our goal in exegesis) involves thinking an author's thoughts after him or her. Or to put it another way, the goal of reading the Bible is to be able to restate an author's original intention in such a way that if the author were listening he or she would agree. The goal is to see reality through another person's eyes. But this is simply impossible until one has thought his/her way, *step by step*, after the author. This is where the art/skill of discourse analysis fits in.

In discourse analysis we do not attempt to put the author's words into our own -- rather, we simply attempt to isolate each proposition (the author's "steps") and to demonstrate how they relate to one another. Having done so, we then can trace the logical development of the author's argument step by step by indicating how the flow of thought moves from logical level to logical level. Finally, after we have a flow chart of the author's argument, we will be able to isolate out each of the author's main logical levels and gain an overview of the argument's development. The result of our labor will be an understanding of the main point of a text and the ways in which it is supported. Discourse analysis has four distinct but related steps:

- Separate out the individual propositions of the text.
- Determine the logical relationships between the propositions.
- Trace the flow of the argument from step to step.
- Organize the text into its major logical levels, thus establishing its main and supporting points.

The Logical Relationship Between Propositions

The key to any discourse analysis is therefore the ability to separate a text into constituent propositions and the art of determining their logical interrelationships. Unfortunately, many people do not know what a proposition is, or what relationships are possible between them. The first gap is easy to fill. With some practice most people are able to recognize propositions in a text, and even become skilled enough to argue over when a certain prepositional or participial phrase ought to be considered to be one or not! By God's

grace, the second need has also met its match through the work of Dr. Daniel P. Fuller of Fuller Theological Seminary.

Dr. Fuller has done a great service to us in our hermeneutical task by classifying these various relationships and providing us with a vocabulary with which we can talk about them. This material can be found in detail in his Hermeneutics Syllabus, copyright 1969, Pasadena, CA (for sale through the Fuller Seminary bookstore). What follows is taken from that syllabus with his permission.

DA - Relationships Between Propositions

Name	Symbol	Definition	Key Words
Series	S	Each proposition makes an independent contribution to the whole	and, moreover, furthermore
Progression	P	Each proposition is a further step towards a climax	then, and, moreover
Alternative	A	Each proposition expresses an opposite possibility arising from a situation	but, on the other hand, while, or
Way-End	W Ed	Statement of action and one which tells more explicitly what is involved in carrying out action	in that, by
Comparison	//	Statement expressing an action and one making that action clearer by showing what it is like	even as, as...so
Negative-Positive	- +	Two alternatives, one of which is denied so that the other is enforced	not...but
General Specific	Gn Sp	Proposition stating a whole and one or more which set forth the parts of the whole	
Fact-Interpretation	Ft In	Proposition and one clarifying its meaning; does not set forth a distinguishable part of the preceding whole	
Ground	G	Statement and the argument or basis on which it stands; supporting follows the supported	for, because, since
Inference	∴	As above; supporting proposition precedes the supported one	therefore, wherefore
Cause-Effect	C E	An action and one automatically consequent upon that action	that, so that
Conditional	C? E	Like above, except the existence of the cause is only potential	if...then, if, except
Means-End	M Ed	An action and the one that is intended to come as a result	in order that, that, lest
Temporal	T	Proposition and the occasion when it can occur	when, whenever
Locative	L	Proposition and the place where it can be true	where, wherever
Adversative	Adv	Main clause that stands despite a contrary statement	although...yet, though but
Question-Answer	Q A	Statement of question and answer to that question	?-mark
Situation-Response	S R	Statement of response to a stated situation or action	

DA - Coordinate vs. Subordinate Relationships

The relationships between propositions fall into two major classes: Coordinate Relationships and Subordinate Relationships. Two clauses have a coordinate relationship if one does not support the other in some way, but each is independent and makes its own contribution to the whole. "I ate pickles for lunch and I studied for my Interp class" are two coordinate propositions. They do not support each other, but describe a series of things that I did. Each can stand independent of the other.

On the other hand, a proposition has a subordinate relationship to another clause if it supports that clause in some way. For example: "I ate pickles because I had no money" is a compound sentence with two propositions. The second proposition, "because I had no money" is subordinate to the first, providing its ground. "I ate pickles" is thus the main point of this text. The main point of a text is that proposition which is supported by all other propositions and which itself does not support any other.

There are a number of subclasses under each of these major classes and each of these, together with the typical conjunctions used to indicate them, must be mastered.

Coordinate Relationships

- **Series:** the relationship between propositions, each of which makes its independent contribution to the whole.
 - o Conjunctions: and, moreover, furthermore, likewise (and many more)
 - o Example: "Every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." (Matt 7:8)
- **Progression:** like a series, but each proposition is a further step toward a climax.
 - o Conjunctions: then (plus others like those under "Series")
 - o Example: "Those whom he predestined he called; and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." (Rom 8:30)
- **Alternative:** each proposition expresses an opposite possibility arising from a situation.
 - o Conjunctions: but, on the other hand, while, etc.
 - o Example: "Some were convinced while others disbelieved." (Acts 28:24)

Subordinate Relationships – Support by Restatement

- **Way-End** (Modal clause-main clause): the relationship between a statement of an action (end) and one, which tells more explicitly what is involved in carrying out this action (way).
 - o Conjunctions: in that, by, etc.

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- o Example: "God left not himself without a witness, in that he gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons." (Acts 14:17)
 - o (We speak of the second proposition "supporting" the first here because it is not independent of it but stands in the service of the first proposition, spelling out in more detail the "way" God gave witness.)
 - **Comparison:** the relationship between a statement expressing an action and one making that action clearer by showing what it is like.
 - o Conjunctions: even as, as...so, etc.
 - o Example: "As my father has sent me, so send I you." (John 20:21)
 - **Negative-Positive:** the relationship between two alternatives, one of which is denied so that the other is enforced. It is also the relationship implicit in contrasting statements.
 - o Conjunctions: not...but, etc.
 - o Example: "Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is..." (Eph 5:17; cf. 1 Cor 4:10 for an example of contrast.)
 - **General-Specific:** the relationship between a proposition stating a whole and one or more propositions, which set forth the parts of the whole.
 - o Example: "Jacob supplanted me these two times: he took away my birthright and now he has taken away my blessing." (Gen 27:36; cf. 1 Cor 9:19-22)
 - **Fact-Interpretation:** the relationship between an original statement and one clarifying its meaning. The interpreting proposition might define only one word of a preceding proposition. It differs from "General-Specific" in that the interpreting proposition does not set forth a distinguishable part of the preceding whole.
 - o Example: "And they drank of the rock that followed them and the rock was Christ." (1 Cor 10:4; cf. 1 Cor 5:9-11)

Subordinate Relationships – Support by Distinct Statement

- **Ground** (Main clause - Causal clause): the relationship between a statement and the argument or basis on which it stands. In this relationship the supporting proposition follows the supported one.
 - o Conjunctions: for, because, since, etc.
 - o Example: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven." (Matt 5:3; cf. Phil 2:25-26)
- **Inference** (Main clause – Inferential clause): the only difference between this and the "Ground" relationship is that here the supporting proposition always precedes the supported one.
 - o Conjunctions: therefore, wherefore, consequently, accordingly, etc.

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- o Example: "The scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. All these things therefore, whatever they bid you, these do and observe." (Matt 23:3; cf. 1 Peter 5:5b-6)
 - **Cause-Effect** (Main clause - Result clause): the relationship between an action and one automatically consequent upon that action.
 - o Conjunctions: so...that, that, so that, etc.
 - o Example: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son..." (John 3:16)
 - **Conditional**: this is like the "Cause-Effect" relationship except that the existence of the cause is only potential.
 - o Conjunctions: if ... then, if, provided that, except, etc.
 - o Example: "If you love me, keep my commandments." (John 14:15; cf. Gal 5:16)
 - **Means-End** (Main clause - Purpose clause): the relationship between an action and the one that is intended to come as a result.
 - o Conjunctions: in order that, that, with a view to, to the end that, lest, etc.
 - o Example: "I long to see you that I might impart some spiritual gift to strengthen you." (Rom 1:11)
 - **Temporal**: the relationship between a proposition and the occasion (not quite the cause) when it can occur.
 - o Conjunctions: when, whenever, etc.
 - o Examples: "When you fast, do not look dismal." (Matt 6:16) "Blessed are you when men hate you." (Luke 6:22)
 - **Locative**: proposition and the place where it can be true.
 - o Conjunctions: where, wherever
 - o Examples: "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." (Acts 8:4)

Subordinate Relationships – Support by Contrary Statement

- **Adversative** (Concessive clause - Main clause): the relationship between a main clause that stands despite a contrary statement, and that contrary statement. The concessive clause "supports" the main clause because it highlights the strength of the main clause, which stands despite the obstacle of the concessive clause.
 - o Conjunctions: although...yet, though, but, nevertheless, etc.
 - o Example: "Though you have 10,000 instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers." (1 Cor 4:15; cf. 1 Cor 9:13-15)

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- **Question-Answer:** this relationship is included here because when the answer is opposite of that, which is implied or expected in the question, the question behaves like a concessive clause and the relationship is in reality adversative.
 - o Example: "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid." (Rom 6:1)
 - o But when an answer contains no surprise, it functions like a restatement of the question.
 - o Example: "What says the Scripture? Abraham believed God..." (Rom 4:3)
 - **Situation-Response:** this relationship is included here because when a person responds in a way not intended by the situation that another creates, the situation behaves like a concessive clause and the relationship is in reality adversative.
 - o Example: "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not?" (Matt 23:38; cf. Jer 25:4-7)
 - o But when the response accords with the situation that has been created, then "Situation-Response" behaves like "Cause-Effect".
 - o Example: "I did one deed, and you all marvel at it." (John 7:21)

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Subordinate Relationships – Support by Contrary Statement

Adversative Adv

Question-Answer Q
A

Situation-Response S
R

Memorize these classifications and their symbols. Now we can begin to do the hard work of reading a work so difficult (no "speed reading" is real reading!) A sure sign you have done it will be fatigue. As Mortimer J, Adler put it:

"Reading that is reading entails the most intense mental activity. If you are not tired out, you probably have not been doing the work. Far from being passive and relaxing, I have always found what little reading I have done the most arduous and active occupation." (How to Read a Book, 1940 ed., p.110)

The Art of Asking Questions

Once we have mastered the various logical relationships that *can* exist between propositions, we will be able to discover and determine which relationships actually do exist as the author's argument unfolds. Therefore, our first task in exegesis will be to analyze the discourse by tracing the flow of the argument, Specifically, we will:

- Translate the passage from Greek into a literal English rendering.
- Go through the passage isolating the individual propositions.
 - o Remember that each proposition must contain both a subject and a predicate.
 - o If you deem it necessary to make a participial or prepositional phrase into a separate proposition, you must either convert the participle into a finite verb or supply one for the prepositional phrase.
- Next, attempt to relate each proposition to what precedes.
 - o Indicate your understanding of the argument by selecting a connecting word or phrase, which makes each relationship explicit.
 - o Whenever an author supplies such a connecting link (conjunction or phrase), remain faithful to it unless it seems absolutely impossible to do so!

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- Finally, outline the argument in the margin by using the bracket method illustrated in class. When you are finished, you should be able to state the main point of the text and all of its supporting points.

But having paraphrased the text, we may be tricked into thinking that we understand what an author is up to (for after all, just to get this far is a major accomplishment!) Actually, we have just begun. We now have something to work with beyond just a vague feeling about the "meaning" of the passage. We now know what our author says, but if this is where we stop, all we have exercised is our memory and a few analytic skills. For in talking about the difference between memory and enlightenment, M.J. Adler writes:

"To be informed is to know simply that something is the case. To be enlightened is to know, in addition, what it is all about: why it is the case, what its connections are with other facts, in what respects it is different, and so forth. This distinction is familiar in terms of the differences between being able to remember something and being able to *explain* it. Enlightenment is achieved only when, in addition to knowing what an author *says* you know what he *means* and *why* he says it." (*How to Read a Book*, 1972 ed., p.11)

How then do we move from memory to understanding or enlightenment? The answer is simple: **ASKING QUESTIONS IS THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING!** This does not mean that the exegete has not already asked many, many questions in the process of analyzing the text. Discourse analysis demands that one ask questions of every individual proposition (See the separate hand-out, "Questions to ask yourself in the attempt to determine the logical relationship between propositions"). In the course of discourse analysis, perhaps six of the seven key observational questions will already have been asked (who?, what?, where?, when?, and why?). But even more specifically, all of the questions needed to come to grips with the argument will have been explored.

But now it is time to ask those questions that flow out of the seventh general category, "What is going on here?" In asking, "what is going on here" kinds of questions, we are not concerned with questions of significance (remember the key distinction between the "meaning" and "significance" of a text!). That will come last. At this point we are still working at the exegetical level. All of the questions we must now ask are questions that spring from the text and are to be answered from the same source.

And in asking and answering these questions, never go to a commentator until you have first allowed yourself the privilege of going to the author! And do not listen to gossip without a very suspecting ear. You will be able to tell if your questions and answers come from the text by whether or not they are phrased with and supported by ideas that have concrete expression in the text itself, the relevant historical background, or theological presuppositions used by the author (be careful with this last one, however, that what you think is presupposed is actually there).

"What is going on here" questions are questions that come about because one now understands what the author is saying, but what the author is saying seems to raise problems with what the author is saying! For as Dr. Fuller has rightly observed:

"Whenever someone is imparting understanding, or insight, or a new way of looking at things, he will always say things which seem strange and, at the outset, incoherent with other things that he is saying."

Thus, for example, after analyzing Jesus' words in Luke 12:1-7 one is troubled by the observation that Jesus commands his disciples to fear and not to fear God at the same time! How is it that Jesus can warn and comfort his "friends" at the same time? And how do Jesus' words of comfort based on the comparison to the value of the birds hold up in view of the fact that God also throws people into hell? These are questions that flow out of the text and whose answers are essential to really understanding what is going on here! When we are done with our discourse analysis, it will be these "strange...incoherent...things" which will force us to think and understand our author.

"Perhaps you are beginning to see how essential a part of reading it is *to be perplexed and know it*. Wonder is the beginning of wisdom in learning from books as well as from nature. If you never ask yourself any questions about the meaning of a passage, you cannot expect the book to give you any insight you do not already possess." (M.J. Adler, How to Read a Book, p.123)

These are profound words and they are certainly true of the book of books as well! When we come to the Bible, our goal is not to read our old, worn ideas back into the text, but to be brought along to new and deeper understandings of the inspired words of the biblical authors, This means that we will never be happy until we read the Scripture carefully enough to be troubled by what we read and then take the time to formulate our problems into questions to ponder and ultimately solve.

Reading = asking questions that you yourself must try to answer in the course of reading! Here are some general guidelines concerning formulating good questions that I have again taken with his permission from the unpublished work of Dr. D.P. Fuller, this time from a paper he wrote in 1977:

- Questions should evince troubledness:
 - o Ask questions which show, by the way they are stated and by their nature, that they arose from your being troubled by what you observed in the text as you analyzed its discourse.
 - o Experience proves that only when we are faced by a sharply focused question will our answers represent the sort of thinking that is worthy of studying the Holy Scriptures.
- Avoid asking a question whose answer is quite obvious or which makes others feel it is being asked primarily to provide an occasion for bringing out some insight that one thinks a verse or passage contains.
- Avoid vague, strange or abstract language in posing your question:
 - o When this kind of language is used, it constitutes evidence that the trouble or uneasiness one feels has not become sufficiently clarified. Remember, you are trying to pinpoint your problem with a question. Work for precision.

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- Substantiate your troubledness where necessary, from inferences drawn from the text, not your own theological convictions or Christian experience:
 - o Primarily, we want to understand the biblical author better, not each other. Besides, you want everyone to feel your problem; otherwise no one will care about the answer.
 - o One of the best ways to both pinpoint a problem and evince to all your feeling of troubledness is to pose a question by asking which of two alternatives (both of which have some plausibility) is true.
 - Avoid asking a question that involves some curiosity arising from something incidental to what is said in the text:
 - o If you have a hunch that others might think your question is trivial, when in fact it is vital for the way you see the author's line of thought, then point out why it is indeed a vital question.

There are also good and bad ways to formulate your answers, either in papers or in the pulpit, or in your own quiet time when asking questions and answering is very important. Here are some criteria to keep in mind for having good answers:

- One part of the answer should be a direct affirmation answering the question. This often should be your first statement.
- Support your answer persuasively by arguments based on the data of the text, and/or some pertinent historical background information, and/or some axiom.
 - o Avoid arguing for answers by mere speculation.
 - o If we are going to persuade people, then we must base arguments logically on facts, and avoid so-called arguments that consist of speculative plausibility.
- Avoid verbosity in your question and answer.
 - o Confine your answer to the conclusion which answers the question and the arguments which support and lead to your conclusion.
 - o Many teachers and preachers lose their audience because they cannot keep to the point.

The Question of Significance

Of course, the final step in any exegesis done with an eye toward the Church is to ask "so what?" At this point we are now ready to span the centuries, with some help along the way (do not neglect the great theologians, commentators, and preachers through the ages!), by building the ties between the Bible and us.

Remember that here the key work is "correspondence"! Our significance will only be as good as the meaning upon which it is built and the analogies that bind our two times and problems together. But if we err, we usually do so at the exegetical end! Mining the meaning of the Bible is hard work. As Francis Bacon once said, "some books are to be tasted, others

to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." There is no doubt which category the Scriptures fall into, or that they are worth our effort.

Let us set ourselves to the task with dedication and anticipation. We have much to learn and the Church has much to gain from it.

For "reading is learning from one who is absent. If you ask a living teacher a question, he will probably answer you. If you are puzzled by what he says, you can save yourself the trouble of thinking by asking him what he means. If, however, you ask a book a question, you must answer it yourself when you question it, it answers you only to the extent that you do the work of thinking and analysis yourself." (Adler, How to Read a Book, p.15)

Understanding Propositions⁶

In the preceding chapters we have made certain generalizations about understanding a text. Now we become more specific by indicating the point at which the process of understanding actually commences. The whole of a text is, of course, essential for grasping its parts, but an understanding of a whole cannot be had without first attending to the parts.

What, then, are the parts with which we begin? While words are the smallest elements of a text, they are not, by themselves, the basic building blocks of a text. They begin to convey determinate meanings only as they are seen as parts of propositions, and it is the propositions, which are a text's basic building blocks. The meanings which words begin to have, as they comprise a part of a proposition are determined, in part, by their syntax, that is, by the way words relate to one another to make up a proposition.

Essentially, a proposition makes an assertion about something. This assertion is the predication and the "something" is the subject. Basically, then, a proposition is a subject and a predicate. The shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35), is composed of two words, the first being the subject, and the second, the predicate. A proposition can even consist of only one word, as in the imperative "Run!" where the subject who is to do the running is already understood.

Usually, however, a proposition consists of more than two words. A subject will often consist of more than one word, and it will usually have phrases and clauses as well as single words for modifiers. Sometimes a predicate will include a transitive verb, which often has one or more direct objects and one or more indirect objects, to say nothing of various modifiers of these objects as well as of the verb itself. At other times a predicate consists of a word or clause joined to a subject by a copulative (usually some form of the verb "to be")--as in John 1:1, "The Word was God"--and very often this predicate nominative construction, as it is called, will have a number of modifiers.

When one has found the subject and the whole predication, as well as all the words that may modify both, then he has delimited one of the text's smallest building blocks, and in seeing how all its words make their contribution to the one proposition, he grasps what this whole proposition is saying, and each of its words becomes meaningful in relation to this one thing. Do the same thing for the next proposition, and so on through the text proposition by proposition. The only words in a text, which are not themselves parts of propositions, are the conjunctions which link propositions together.

The grasping of how words function to form propositions is greatly enhanced by the visual presentation afforded by sentence diagramming. The diagrams of the following propositions in the Greek are given to show the various forms which the subject and predicate and their modifiers can take.