OUTLINING SCRIPTURE TEXTS FOR EXPOSITORY SERMONS
An Overview

Knowing how to accurately outline a text of Scripture in preparation to preach expositionally is critically important. Many preachers spend more time trying to word their outline points in a catchy or alliterative way, than in trying to craft an outline that faithfully represents the inspired text. Accuracy to the authorial intent of Scripture should always receive higher priority than verbal finery. We must be careful not to cover up the gangrene of a mishandled text with the perfumed lace of linguistic prowess. However, if you can accurately craft an exegetical outline that submits to the authorial intent of the inspired text of Scripture and deliver the truth wrapped in the garb of a queen, do that! *You can have both.* In fact, it is to be preferred, but never neglect accuracy to the text for verbal splendor.

In almost every area of expository preaching exceptions can be found, and so it is with outlining texts. The challenging part in writing about outlining Scripture texts for expository sermons is that the biblical genre (kind of literature), size of the text, purpose of the sermon, and the time one has to preach a sermon or series of sermons can affect how you outline a text. The preacher who is preaching slowly through a New Testament epistle is not going to outline his texts the same way as a preacher preaching through large portions of Old Testament narrative. When you consider a preacher may preach texts that range from extra small to extra-large, or even a whole book in a single sermon, and that the genre might be law, narrative, epistle, proverb, psalm, gospel, parable, or prophetic, it creates a lot of outlining challenges and options that the expository preacher needs to learn over the course of time.

I am not trying to make you faint like the Apostle John did before the angel, I merely want to give you some realistic expectations. You are not going to be an ace at deriving accurate exegetical outlines from every kind and size of biblical text overnight. You may crash and burn like the Hindenburg in some sermons by failing to represent the authorial intent or you may crash into the ice of complicated grammar and syntax and your mangled outline will sink to the bottom of murky failure like the Titanic. Even a man who graduates the top of his class from an excellent seminary will have to labor all his life to learn to outline the many kinds and sizes of biblical texts he will encounter over the course of his preaching ministry. Take a deep breath. Have another sip of coffee. Relax. You are at the base of Mount Outlines, but by God's grace, you can reach the summit! See it jutting up before you from the plain of Scripture, its peak disappearing into the clouds of inspired revelation!

Because I cannot, in this one article, give you instruction and examples for every kind of biblical genre and size of text, my goal is to give you some basic and nearly universal *principles that apply* to many kinds and sizes of texts the expository preacher will encounter in preaching the whole counsel of God's Word. In later articles we will focus on outlining specific kinds and sizes of texts. Pick up your hermeneutical crampons, carabiners, and pickax and follow me as we head out together on the exegetical trail that slowly ascends the Mount of Outlines.

Rock Bottom Outlining Essentials

First, your main outline points need to match the inspired emphasis of the biblical text you are preaching. This may sound obvious, and yes, there are exceptions, but as a rule, *the main points of your sermon must submit to and reflect the inspired main emphasis of the text*. I know, you are probably thinking to yourself, "What are the exceptions?" Be patient. First, become familiar with the rule and then over the course of time you can learn about the exceptions to the rule. Whatever big idea, theme, focus the original author had in writing his text should be reflected in the main points and title of your sermon. "But how do you find the main points of a text?" an eager student asks. We will get there, be patient. I have a section under "Sermon Construction" titled "Sermon Outlines" where I give you many examples of exegetical sermon outlines derived from text flow diagrams (Click Here). For now, focus on what I am telling you as it will help you later. Fix this first principle in your mind, ***My sermon outline must reflect the authorial intent and inspired emphasis of the text I am preaching***.

Second, whatever words or phrases speak about or modify the main points will be your sub points or paragraphs that further explain your main outline points. Sometimes there will be phrases that modify or speak about other phrases that modify or speak about the main points. Now you might be wondering to yourself, "Why bother with all this talk about *main points* and *subpoints*?" Because the Bible is the inspired Word of God. As a preacher you are commanded by God to be an unashamed workman, "handling accurately or with precision, the Word of truth" (II Tim. 2:15). Therefore, if you fail to handle the Word of God accurately, you are sinning against God, distorting what Jesus Christ wants to say to His Church through you, the preacher.

Below is an example of how you might outline a text. There is an endless variety of inspired structures in the multitude of biblical texts. *Discovering the inspired text so you can craft your outline requires solving an exegetical puzzle.*

First Main Point
      A phrase that modifies the first main point
      A phrase that modifies the first main point
Second Main Point
      A phrase that modifies second main point
      A phrase that modifies second main point
            A phrase that modifies the phrase that modifies the second main point
            A phrase that modifies the phrase that modifies the second main point

In outline form the same textual structure above would look like:

I. FIRST MAIN POINT
      A. First Subpoint
      B. Second Subpoint

II. SECOND MAIN POINT
      A. First Subpoint
      B. Second Subpoint
            1. *First sub, sub point*
            2. *Second sub, sub point*

Mishandling the Word of God is a very grave offence. It is why James tells us, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that we will incur a stricter judgment" (James 3:1). Preacher or aspiring preacher, be afraid to mishandle the Word of God. Don't arm twist your text to make it say what you want it to say for your own well-intentioned purposes. Don't put your text into a headlock and force feed it truths from other biblical texts. Don't try to "Christianize" your text by sprinkling it with "Jesus in every text" pixie dust. Stop! Don't read *anything* into the text you are preaching! Avoid the foul poison of eisegesis! Strive *to take out of the text* the truths already contained in it.

There is plenty of truth contained in every biblical text. Find the truths within the text for they are sufficient for your sermon. Let God speak through His Word clearly and accurately. Don't gag God with your opinions, thoughts, or even truths from other biblical texts, yet which the original author could never have had in mind. *Creating accurate exegetical outlines for expository sermons is about discovering and submitting to the inspired structure, grammar, and syntax of the inspired Word of God.*

I am not denying the proper use of cross references, illustrations, word pictures, quotes, etc. Remember, we are talking about deriving an accurate outline from the text. *After* you derive an accurate outline from your text, then you work at interpreting, illustrating, doing word studies, etc. But for now, we are trying to frame the house of our sermon so that it rests on the concrete foundation of the inspired emphasis of the Scriptures.

Third, after you accurately craft an outline from the text you are intending to preach, you don't need to make a big deal of pointing out or emphasizing the text's structure. If you have read the puritans, you know what I am talking about. They love to have main points and sub points, and sub-sub points, etc., galore, especially when they get into application. It is okay to not mention your sermon points and merely say, "First we want to look at. . ., next we see . . ., and finally . . ." You can deemphasize a text's structure *in your sermon delivery*, but you need to accurately know what the structure of a text is *in your sermon preparation* if you are going to be an expository preacher. As the expository preacher, you get to choose how much you will emphasize structure in your sermons. With all this talk about outlining texts accurately, I don't want you to think I am telling you that you need to point out every main point, sub-point, sub-sub-point, etc. Yes, you need to know the structure of the text in preparation. No, you don't need to emphasize the structure of the text in sermon delivery.

For instance, if you were to read the sermon on the mount in Mt. 5-7 you would not see Jesus saying, "Point one. . ., Point two. . .," etc. Granted, the gospel writers and the Holy Spirit were selective in revealing what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount so that what we have in our Bibles is condensed, but the point I am making is that *you get to choose*. There is no standard "right amount" when it comes to how much structure you want to reveal to your congregation in your preaching.

What I like to do is emphasize the main points and then emphasize the subpoints less by saying, "first, second, third. . ." or "Look at . . ., next we see. . ., finally. . . There are always exceptions to the rule, like when I am preaching a difficult and/or disputed text. In that case, I might be very precise in pointing out the structure, so people know exactly what is primary and what is secondary in the text. Most people like some

structure in the sermon so they can take notes or follow along more easily. However, a puritanical approach leading to "sub point thirty-two" can get laborious. Everyone is glad that the walls of their house contain lumber framing so that their house has strength and a fixed shape, but most people don't want to see the studs. The same is true with those who listen to your sermons, they want the studs hidden in the walls and covered up with the drywall of interpretation, painted with illustration and cross references, and adorned with pictures of application. Listen carefully to your favorite expository preachers and notice how much structure they emphasize in their sermons. Experiment and figure out what works best for you and your sheep.

After you get an accurate exegetical outline derived from the text you intend to preach, you can write a propositional statement that matches your outline. The proposition is a concise summary statement of what you are going to preach from your text. As you begin to study the text, make observations, do word studies, look up cross references, illustrate, read commentaries, etc., you can add your goodies under the appropriate outline point or sub-points. Having a good outline *before* fleshing out your sermon will save you huge amounts of time in sermon preparation! I pity the preacher who dumps everything he finds about his text into one large jumbled mass of textual data and then tries to sort through that data dump to form an outline. That approach is backwards and inaccurate for it tries to craft an outline out of the preacher's study, rather than the text itself and takes much more time that could be used to better purposes.

We have now reached the base of Mount Outlines. We have the basics of what we need to reach the peak. I will deal with deriving outlines from specifics genres and sizes of texts in other articles.

THE GOD OF JESHURUN IS YOUR HOPE
Deuteronomy 33:26–27 (NASB95)

I. GOD IS UNIQUE
II. GOD IS YOUR HELP
III. GOD IS MAJESTIC
IV. GOD IS AN ETERNAL REFUGE
V. GOD WILL UPHOLD HIS PEOPLE
VI. GOD WILL DESTROY HIS ENEMIES