

Practical Guidelines for Writing an Exegetical Research Paper

There are specific directions you need to follow if you want to bake a cake. It is very important that you follow these instructions exactly as they are written if you want your cake to taste right. You will either undercook or burn your cake if you set your oven to the wrong temperature. Your cake will stick to the pan if you overlook the instruction to grease its bottom first. It is also important to include all the necessary cake ingredients. If you are making a cake from scratch and you forget to add the baking powder, you are going to be very disappointed when you take your cake out of the oven and find that it is as flat as a pancake! Or, if you forget to add eggs or butter, it probably is not going to taste very good to you or anyone else.

It makes sense to follow instructions; they are written to help you reach the goal you have set for yourself. But you have to do all of the steps; you cannot skip some or substitute in your own directions because you think they are better or that they will quicken the process. When you learn to make something a certain way and it turns out the way it is supposed to, you will tend to repeat that method and always do it that way to get the same results. The process of Bible interpretation is the same way! There are certain steps you need to follow and a certain order they need to be done in. You start by learning the steps, and then you can become good at interpreting any passage of Scripture. But if you do not get the basics down first, you will have a hard time understanding what a certain verse means and how it applies to your life, or more importantly, you might miss what the Holy Spirit is speaking to you concerning that verse.

The Three Step Model of Bible interpretation is one way we can understand and interpret Scripture correctly. To clarify, this is not: Three “Easy” Steps for Bible interpretation. It will still require much time and effort to uncover the meaning of a particular Bible passage, but it will serve as a useful guideline to help you comprehend the richness and complexity of the Scriptures. This model is also used because it helps safeguard three very important truths as we interpret the Bible:

1) **What the author meant is what the text means:** When Scripture is interpreted, there is a tendency to try and make the text say what *we* want it to say (this is called *Eisegesis*: “to put in” [we put our own meaning into the text]). This type of interpretation has led to many incorrect and misleading explanations of Scripture. Instead, we focus our concern on *Exegesis*: “to take out” where we discover the meaning of a text by letting it speak to us and show us what it meant for the original audience and how we can then apply that meaning to our own lives.

2) **Scripture is meant to teach principles that are universally applicable:** Although much of Scripture can be directly applied to our lives, there are instances where specific commands and promises were meant only for a particular person or people group. A Scripture is applicable to us if the principle is repeated throughout Scripture; our task as Bible scholars is being able to discern its proper use.

3) **Understanding is useless unless it leads to change:** In Scripture, there is an undeniable connection between understanding and action. If you understand the meaning of a particular Scripture, you will apply it to your life and put it into practice; if you do not understand, you will not change. Understanding is not a mental activity, it involves our whole being.

The Three Step Model to Bible Interpretation

In order to correctly interpret any Bible passage, you need to learn and follow the proper steps. **First**, you will need to understand the original situation (this is the world of the author and the audience to whom the author is speaking). **Second**, after you understand what a particular passage meant in its original context, you will need to find the general principles (these are eternal truths that are true for everyone everywhere). **Third**, you will apply these general principles and make them relevant for today (discerning what this principle means and how it can apply to our everyday lives). These three steps will allow you to: 1) discover and clarify the timeless truths found in Scripture, 2) communicate these truths with others around you.

Step One: Understanding the Original Situation

This is the hardest and definitely the longest of all three steps. It is also the most crucial step because it lays the foundation for steps two and three. If you do not do a thorough job at uncovering the historical context, it will be very difficult to later come up with general principles that stay true to the original meaning of the text. Remember that the purpose of this step is to know what the passage meant for the original audience so that we can then understand what it means for us today.

This sounds easy enough, but it can be complicated by such barriers as culture (money, tools, weights, measures, etc), language, and physical environment (landscapes, cities, etc). These are all things that each one of us takes for granted. All cultures are seen on two levels: the physical (what you can naturally see and observe) and the “under the surface” (values, beliefs, thought patterns, etc) that you may not otherwise understand unless you grew up in that country and were accustomed to them.

This is why it is difficult to understand the original situation: the Bible is a book written in a culture and language that is very different from our own. In order to comprehend what is written in the Bible, you have to “dig out” the life situation of the original author and audience. Their culture and history need to be taken seriously! Without actually being there, you need to hear what the people heard and see what the people saw. If you are to understand anything, you must understand Scripture in its own context and its surrounding context(s).

In order to complete this section for your exegetical paper, you will need to take on the role of a detective – asking the right questions and figuring out how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together so you can correctly understand the text and relate it to your readers. You will use information about the text’s language, grammar, literary forms, history, and culture to help discover the author’s intended meaning for a particular passage of Scripture. Establish the background of the book you are studying: who is the author, when was it written, who was it written to, and why? Read the context around the passage you are studying: where does it begin and end, what comes before and after? Observe the passage carefully: what questions does this text want to ask? Outline your research. Read your passage in another translation. Read parallel accounts in other parts of Scripture. Study significant words. Identify the genre and literary structures. Look for the important cultural and historical events taking place at the time the passage was written.

Of course, you will not know the answers to these questions off the top of your head unless you are a well versed Bible scholar. You will need many important resources (commentaries, Bible dictionaries, concordances, etc.) to help you discover the historical context and bring out the original meaning of a passage. Do not be discouraged if this seems tough to do. It will get easier with practice.

Step Two: Finding General Principles

Now that you have uncovered the historical context of the passage and understand what it meant to the original audience, you are ready for the next step: finding general principles. Before we do this, however, we need to ask the question: “What is a Biblical Principle?” A Biblical principle is a simple, declarative statement (or proverbial saying) that:

- 1) Expresses a clear truth found in Scripture and is supported throughout the Bible
- 2) Is binding on everyone in every place
- 3) Expresses God’s will or God’s mind on a subject or theme
- 4) Can be expressed in a clear and understandable manner to others.

Look for the ideas, values, and truths that a story, command, prophecy, etc. is trying to communicate. Seek to state those principles in a way that is true and useful for all people, at all times, and in all situations.

How do you find a Biblical principle?

First, you need to study your passage thoroughly, observing the details and getting in touch with the meaning in “their world” (Step One).

Second, you need to look for the central teachings or ideas expressed in the text.

Third, state your principle(s) in simple declarative form. A declarative sentence makes a statement; it tells us something about a person, a place, a thing, or an idea.

For example: “God’s love is unconditional” or “Jesus requires that we sacrifice everything in order to follow Him.” State your principle(s) in the fewest words possible and use the clearest, simplest language you can. Make sure that your statement also summarizes your study and expresses the true meaning of the passage.

Fourth, test your principle(s) against what the rest of the Bible says. Check back to the passage itself (Does this passage really teach what I am suggesting it does?). Check through other Bible passages (Are there other passages in the Bible that clearly state and support my proposed principle?). Check out Bible examples, stories, and illustrations (Do the lives and experiences of the people in the Bible line up with my proposed principle?). Check with Bible commentaries and Church teachings to weigh your findings against other scholars (Have others found the same insights I claim to have found?). Understand that reason, tradition, and experience are significant factors in the process of interpreting Scripture. Principles must be clear, logical, and defensible; they must be compatible with the way Christians have interpreted the Scriptures throughout history; and they must help to make sense out of the human experience in which we live.

Fifth, adjust your statement to fit the results of your test. Ultimately there is no such thing as simply “private interpretation.” All interpretation takes place within the Christian community and submits itself to it. Interpretation is not finished until it has been fine-tuned.

Step Three: Applying General Principles Today

In this final step, we carefully move from what Scripture “meant” to its original audience to what it “means” for us today. This is called “application.” The simple definition of an application is “a general principle which has been obeyed in a specific situation.”

For example:

Principle: God requires Christians to love their neighbors as themselves (Jas 2:8).

Application 1: Visit the elderly in the nearby convalescent home who have no family or friends to love and appreciate them.

Application 2: Mow the lawn for my neighbor across the street because he broke his leg last week and cannot do his yard work.

You need to recognize that forming an application requires discernment! Scripturally, this discernment is both the result of the Spirit’s activity in our lives and a result of disciplined study of and obedience to the Word of God. Remember that the goal of all application is Christ-likeness and the advancement of the Kingdom of God. An application that does not result in these things, does not pass the test of Scripture – no matter how logical it may seem or attractive it may be.

It is also important to understand that we give and are given much freedom when it comes to the application of Scripture for our lives. Avoid falling into the same trap of legalism that the Pharisees fell into. The Pharisees turned the Bible into a rule book and then condemned everyone who did not perfectly follow their own man-made rules. They even condemned Jesus of breaking the rules that they had made for the observance of the Sabbath! Do not substitute a particular application for the principle itself, and accept differences in application with graciousness. Personality, culture, and past experiences play a large role in determining the specific application required by general principles. Just because your application is not the same as your friend's or your co-worker's, that does not mean that your application is right and their application is wrong (or the other way around). God may be telling you to do something specific as a result of studying a certain Scripture, and He may be leading another person (who read that same Scripture maybe even in the same exact Bible study you are in) a different direction. It is very important to hear clearly and discern what the Spirit of God is speaking to you and do whatever He tells you to do.

Also, do not compromise on the essentials! There is much freedom given to us when we apply Scripture, but we must remember that we are not given "a license to do anything." The misuse of freedom is as much a foe to the Christian faith as legalism; they are on opposite extremes. Remember that the Holy Spirit is the primary guide in the application of truth. Ask Him for guidance about the meaning for today and then prayerfully meditate on the meaning of the passage. Seek the Spirit's guidance by seeing how He has led other Christians (both inside and outside your own denominational tradition) to interpret the meaning and application of the passage for today.

Put the principles and the applications in language that makes sense to the people who read your paper, and keep the proper "end goals" in view. The intent of all Bible study is to mature the reader in the life and love of Jesus Christ, to the glory of God. Knowledge alone is not the goal of good Bible interpretation, but life transformation. If we miss this key point, we have missed the purpose of our study.

***End Note:** The Bible Interpretation Outline (next page) will walk you through the important questions to ask the text as you work through Step One: Understanding the Original Situation for any exegetical paper.