

Faith Pulpit

The Task of Exegesis

One of the hallmarks of *The Fundamentals*¹ was its high view of Scripture. This emphasis resulted naturally from the historical challenges posed by modernism.² With its historical skepticism, Modernism questioned not only the authorship and dates of biblical books, but also denied the supernatural content that is recorded in those books. As a result, *The Fundamentals* sought to defend the accuracy and authority of the Bible from its detractors.

As one peruses the table of contents of *The Fundamentals*, one sees a number of articles that relate directly to a high view of Scripture and its authenticity. One finds articles refuting higher criticism (1:9; 1:55; 1:76) and critical views of the composition of biblical books (1:43; 1:241; 1:259; 1:288). One finds several articles defending inspiration (2:9; 2:44; 2:61; 2:80; 2:97; 2:112; 4:264) and the historical reliability of Scripture (1:293; 1:315). Furthermore, one finds articles that defend crucial doctrinal concepts that are derived from a high view of Scripture. It is clear that a high view of Scripture was shared and emphasized by the contributors and editors of *The Fundamentals*.

While the impact of a high view of Scripture is most clearly seen in *The Fundamentals* in relationship to belief, or doctrine, this belief should also have a profound impact upon one's practice and methodology. This includes one's method of Bible study.

The modest goal of this article is to highlight exegetical methodology. This goal will be accomplished (1) by establishing the logical correlation between a high view of Scripture and exegesis³ and (2) by briefly outlining a Scripture-centered methodology for biblical study.

A High View of Scripture and Exegetical Methodology

Exegetical methodology should be natural for those who hold to a high view of Scripture. After all, if God has spoken, His people should seek to understand what He has said. Since the Bible is God's

communication to humanity, then believers should devote time and study into determining the meaning of the text.

The Bible itself gives strong testimony to its divine origin, innate authority, complete trustworthiness, practical value, and transformative power. The quintessential text on the inspiration of the Bible, 2 Timothy 3:16–17, affirms these qualities: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.”

Firstly, this passage strongly affirms the divine origin of the Bible. The Scriptures are not merely the words of men (cf. 2 Pet. 1:21); they are “God-breathed.” Secondly, because the Bible is “God-breathed,” it carries the authority of God Himself. Thirdly, if the Bible is “God-breathed,” it is also completely true. Since the Bible is the Word of God and since God cannot lie (cf. Titus 1:2), His Word must be true (cf. John 17:17). Fourthly, the Bible is practical and beneficial. The Scriptures provide everything believers need for doctrine (negatively and positively) and practice (negatively and positively). It is sufficient for sound theology and practical Christian living. Finally, the Word of God is transformational; it is powerful (cf. Heb. 4:12). The purpose of the Bible is to bring the believer to maturity and consistent Christian conduct.

While more could be said, these thoughts from 2 Timothy 3:16–17 clearly affirm a high view of Scripture. It is this view of Scripture that undergirds the exegetical method. If the Bible is divine and carries divine authority, if it is completely true and accurate; if it is powerful and sufficient to transform the life of the believer, then the task of the preacher and teacher is to understand the Bible and communicate its message to a modern audience.

Sadly, those who hold to a high view of Scripture sometimes betray that belief through preaching and teaching that neglects sound exegesis of the biblical text. At times this may occur innocently through a lack of knowledge of the historical context of Scripture, the meaning of biblical terms, or the context in which biblical statements are found. More serious abuse of the biblical text occurs when words and phrases are taken out of context and twisted to fit the speaker’s agenda. While the speaker may be well-meaning and sincere, ignoring the immediate context and making words say something other than their intended meaning undermines one’s belief in the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. At times a high view of Scripture is betrayed through undue reliance upon rhetorical strategies and coercive appeals. While good illustrations and legitimate appeals are a part of good communication, they can unwittingly displace the power and authority of the Scriptures when they take precedence over the biblical text itself. The point is this: if the speaker is communicating biblical truth, it should be supported by sound exegesis without distortion or embellishment.

Accuracy in handling the biblical text is a difficult and demanding task. However, the work of exegesis should never be bypassed because it is precisely the responsibility of the interpreter to accurately

communicate the message of the Word of God (cf. 2 Tim. 2:15). Exegesis should be embraced because it is the most effective way to proclaim God's revealed truth and to impact lives with that truth.

An Overview of Exegetical Methodology

The Fundamentals only briefly addresses the issue of methods for biblical study (e.g., 4:268–271). Nevertheless, exegetical methodology is certainly consistent with the emphasis on the inspiration and authority of Scripture advocated in *The Fundamentals*. If the Bible is God's authoritative communication to mankind, then the preacher's sermon and the teacher's lesson should accurately reflect that message. Consequently, in the remainder of this article, I will outline a brief methodology for exegesis.⁴

One of the most effective and simplest methods of Bible study is the time-tested inductive Bible study pattern: "observe, interpret, and apply."⁵ This basic framework will be adapted below, highlighting specific steps within these three stages. In addition to "observe, interpret, and apply," a final stage will be added: "refine." This last stage is especially important for the preacher or teacher who will be presenting material in a more formal setting. Thus I will outline ten steps in exegetical method, grouped into these four stages. I believe that by following the process of inductive Bible study, the preacher or teacher can most consistently proclaim the intended message of Scripture and hold the Scriptures in highest esteem.

Stage One: Observe

Scripture-centered exegesis begins with the text itself. The interpreter should observe the details of the text and gain a working knowledge of its contents. Without a thorough knowledge of the text itself, how can the interpreter expect to explain God's inspired message?

The first step in exegesis is to familiarize yourself with the text. This naturally begins with reading the text numerous times. The interpreter should consult various versions and even translate the passage if possible.

A second important step in exegesis is to question the text. At this point, the interpreter employs questions—who, what, when, why, where, how, etc.—to observe the contours of the text. More specific issues to consider here include the boundaries, genre, and main theme of the passage, as well as any textual or interpretive difficulties found in the text.

The third exegetical step is to analyze the form of the text. In this step the interpreter should outline or diagram the text. The interpreter should use a method with which he is comfortable but that reveals the natural flow and development of the text itself. This analysis may seem tedious but is well worth the effort because it helps the interpreter see the details of the text itself.

Stage Two: Interpret

After observing the details of the text, the exegete should move on to verify and validate these observations. This is where interpretation fits in. This stage traces out the significance of the observations that have been made to determine the original meaning of the passage. Again, the focus of this stage is on the text itself, since that is where God's message resides. The interpretation stage includes four additional steps.

The fourth step of exegesis is to investigate the details of the text. This is done by researching items such as the grammatical structures, key words, and significant biblical concepts. While interpreters vary in their abilities to engage in these studies, reliable resources are available for students of all skill levels to ensure accuracy in biblical interpretation.

A fifth exegetical step is to consider the broader context of the text. The interpreter must consider both the historical and the literary context of the passage. These contexts help identify what the words of Scripture would have communicated in their original setting. When these contexts are ignored, the interpreter runs the risk of misinterpreting and even misrepresenting the Word of God.

Sixth, the exegete should determine the biblical-theological contribution of the passage. Here the interpreter should identify other passages that relate directly to the present passage and note how the passage fits within the broad theological themes found in Scripture. This helps the interpreter see how the passage connects to God's overall communication to mankind revealed in the pages of Scripture.

The seventh step of exegesis is to verify one's conclusions about the text. It is at this point that the interpreter considers relevant secondary literature (commentaries, etc.) to test and, if necessary, modify his conclusions. While this may seem rather late in the process, this actually allows the interpreter to focus on the text itself and engage effectively in personal study of the Bible.

Stage Three: Apply

Moving to the application stage, the interpreter needs to avoid pitfalls of neglecting application, on one hand, and jumping to application prematurely, on the other. Good biblical study, teaching, and preaching begins with a thorough understanding of the text itself and then moves from the ancient context to the relevance of this material to the modern audience.

The eighth step of exegesis is to consider similarities and differences between the original context and the present context. While some points of similarity and difference are obvious, others need to be more carefully nuanced to identify general principles so that the interpreter can avoid invalid applications of God's Word.

Next, the ninth step of exegesis can be considered: make specific application from the text. Having identified broad similarities and differences between the biblical context and the modern, the interpreter can proceed to identify those principles that are valid in both contexts. Good applications can only be built upon valid points of similarity between the biblical and present contexts.

Stage Four: Refine

After one has observed, interpreted, and applied the text, the work of exegesis is not completely finished. Now the conclusions from all of the previous steps need to be sifted and collated. *Thus, the tenth step of exegesis is to prepare the material for presentation.* This includes the more “homiletical” tasks of organizing the material, weeding out information where necessary, adding illustrations, etc. The goal of this step is to clearly communicate God’s revealed message. Since the preacher or teacher is explaining God’s revealed Word, the final presentation should be clear, convincing, interesting, and, above all, biblically accurate.

Conclusion

A high view of Scripture ought to be complemented with Bible study methods that focus on the biblical text itself and that seek to determine its original meaning. I have suggested that the stages “observe, interpret, apply, and refine” provide a helpful framework for organizing one’s exegetical method in preparation for preaching and teaching. This methodology emphasizes the authority of the biblical text and relies upon the power of the Word of God to impact lives.

Careful exegesis is hard work, but it ought to be prized by those who esteem the biblical text. If the Bible is inspired, inerrant, and authoritative, then we should be concerned with its message. If it is powerful and transformative, then we should trust it to change lives. And if it is God’s Word, then we should prioritize its original meaning and rely on it to transform modern audiences.

Works Cited

1. R. A. Torrey and A. C. Dixon, eds., *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, 4 vols., reprint (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1917).
 2. “Modernism” is often used as a synonym for theological liberalism. See “Glossary of Biblical Fundamentalism,” *Frontline* 29, no. 3 (May/June 2019), 5. Modernism is a specific departure from historic orthodoxy that arose in the late nineteenth century.
 3. As used here, “exegesis” refers to methodology that seeks to determine the original meaning of Scripture.
 4. For more detailed treatments see Douglas K. Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3rd ed (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3rd ed (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002); Jason Shane DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017); and Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017).
 5. See Robert A Traina, *Methodical Bible Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), originally published in 1952. More recently, see Richard Alan Fuhr Jr. and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Inductive Bible Study: Observation, Interpretation, and Application through the Lenses of History, Literature, and Theology* (Nashville: B&H, 2016).
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