

Doing Good Digital Exegesis



In the book and paper world, biblical exegesis is a time consuming, but useful task. Without it, you cannot faithfully preach the Word of God. A computer and Bible Study software will help you do high-quality, biblical exegesis in far less time than it would using stacks of books and a legal pad. And your study will be more advanced as you utilize powerful original language tools, even if you don't know Greek or Hebrew.

A Word About Faithful Bible Study

As a student of preaching, much of the preaching I have heard has been like the ice covering my church's parking lot – very wide, very shallow and quite precarious to those who venture into it. For three weeks, between my last ministry assignment and my present one, I visited some of the churches in our area hoping to hear some good, Expository Preaching. What I got instead was “bible-lite.” At one service the message was a rah-rah, “aren't we a good church” rally. At another we were treated to a “talk” about some very biblical ideas, but few of which came from the passage the preacher quoted. A third was a great message. I enjoyed it both times I encountered it – once in this sermon and in a book by David Jeremiah. After that three weeks off, I felt like I'd been robbed of an opportunity to hear from the Lord. I hope that if you are a pastor or bible study leader you will seek a higher level of proclamation. With the current crop of bible programs, world-class, biblical exegesis is within the grasps of the average bible student.

What Is Good Biblical Exegesis?

The best way to study the bible is to start with the bible. That sounds rudimentary, but many preachers and teachers are so enamored by the 348 commentaries that came in the “Gold Package” from Joe's Bible software Company, that they want to start there. Don't!

The first step is to read the bible. The majority of basic level bible programs have a dozen or dozens of translations and paraphrases. Read

them. Not sure what verses to use in your lesson or sermon? Follow the periscopes (those titled sections in the bible) and work from there. If you think the verse before or the verse after goes with that section then add it. But make sure you have a good reason to do so. Then, just read that passage in as many of the translations and paraphrases as you can. Bible programs have a function for this task. Look for the word parallel. You pick your favorite translations and display them side-by-side. I use *Logos Digital Library System* for this. It has multiple ways to read and compare different translations. But almost all of them let you do this somehow. Keep reading and re-reading.

The next step is to take note of what is there. Start recording your observations. Again Bible software is great for this. The notes feature lets you add a note to a word, verse, chapter or book. Write everything you can in the note. Be forewarned; if you switch software packages you will likely

lose all your notes. So you may want to use your word processor, notepad, or something like Microsoft OneNote. However, you do it, save your notes in a digital format so you can later search them and copy them into your sermon or lesson files.

After making observations, you will want to investigate the passage a little. Take note of issues you will need to investigate. For example: Who wrote this and to whom? Why did they write it? What are the meanings of the significant words (original language study) and are there any references to geographical places? Are there any important words to look up in a dictionary or in a cross reference? Go over the passage repeatedly.


When you are finished writing down all the questions, answer them. Even if you don't have skills in Greek or Hebrew, you can use the tools in your Bible software package to study them. Advanced programs, let you mouse over a word and have a window popup. It might include an original Greek or Hebrew definition, parsing information and other explanations. Any cross references you find will be hyperlinked allowing you to click it or mouse over it to read the passage in a popup. If your package doesn't have popups, it might have a separate window that will change based on what you mouse over or click. For example, if you want to know the meaning of the word "propitiation" you can single-click it if it is hyperlinked, double-click it to show a new window with a dictionary or lexicon entry, or right-click with any number of options related to looking up in other reference works. The key is using your software to answer these questions.

After that, consult other works in your library that are pertinent, like commentaries, dictionaries, Christian living books that might have information about the passage. You can find this by searching.

My Preparation Work Flow

Here is my work flow:



1. Delineate the beginning and ending verse by reading the greater passage repeatedly. For short books I read the whole book. But for longer books I read the chapters before and after.
2. Read the passage in parallel versions and consult Logos' other passage comparison tools.
3. Look up the book my passage is in (like Ephesians or Isaiah) in a Bible Dictionary and then Handbook to understand the background. I also read the introduction in a few of my favorite commentaries. That way I know the *situation* of the writing.
4. Translate the passage from Greek or use the passage tool in BibleWorks that lists all the significant words and their lexicon entries. Alternatively, I will do an Exegetical Guide search in Logos. Take note of significant findings that will help enhance your understanding of the text in a word file.
5. Next I look up the key words in dictionaries or I do a topic search on that word. This will help me see how it is used in other bible passages, what other authors have said about it in reference works (encyclopedias) and any other book in my digital library. If you have a large library this list could be impossible to read through in a short time. But you will learn what the most fruitful references are and go to them first. Keep taking notes.
6. Read commentaries and record findings.
7. Now it is time to outline. I used to just copy the passage into Word and do an outline of the passage. We don't have time to go into the skill of biblical outlining here. Look at Haddon Robinson's book *Biblical Preaching* (see it at <http://wapurl.co.uk/?Q57VK8J>) or Wayne McDill's *12 Essential Skills for Great Preaching* (found at <http://wapurl.co.uk/?7X76SGC>) both of which




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explain this skill well. Both BibleWorks and Logos have great biblical outlining capabilities built in. This skill helps you see the relationship of ideas to other ideas. Often, you will see the sermon outline in this outline. For poetry and narrative this skill is less useful. But still do it so that you will have to fight with the words. If you are doing a narrative passage study, then you might want to outline the story in a narrative plot line. Summarize the introduction, the rising action, the climax, the resolution, and then the resulting situation in a sentence or two for each. If there are major statements by characters that communicate a message, outline these the way you would non-narrative passages.

8. Once you have gathered all this material and outlined the passage, it is time to determine what the main idea of the passage is. Simply state the subject and the complement. The subject is best expressed in the form of a question that the passage answers. John 3:16 might have the question, "How did God show us his love for the whole world?" The complement or answer is, "He gave his son for the sins of the world and invites us to believe in Him." This will then help you outline your passage. This process is easier when you use a word processor. You can delete and rewrite it over and over without ruining your paper and wasting your ink. This is also a good time to get away from the passage. Save all your notes in either your bible study package or a word processor file. Take some time to let your mind rest and think. Come back later and re-read your notes and try again to come up with a good idea (subject/complement). For more information on the subject and complement of a passage see Haddon Robinson's book cited above.

9. Now that you've chosen a good subject and complement (your sermon's main idea). Type out your sermon's purpose. Why will you preach or teach this passage?

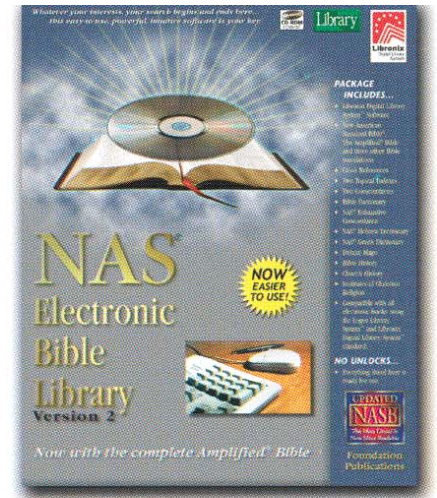
10. Now hit the web. Search for the concepts involved in your idea. This will give you some good illustrative material and will also help you find some good ideas for ways to present your message. Search good preaching and sermons sites for ideas. But while most of the online sermon sites have some bad sermons, they often will have nugget or two that can be incorporated into your message.

11. Finally, write your message. Remember to first create a full-sentence outline. Again, see a good preaching text on writing outlines. For a great book on how to craft messages that are biblical and have contemporary appeal, see Jason Moore and Len Wilson's book *Digital Story Tellers*. Get it here: <http://wapurl.co.uk/?T572KQT>. A great way to do this is think of popular cultural references that are similar to your idea. If you are preaching on Paul's passage about milk versus meat in 1 Corinthians, you might use the old Wendy's commercial line "Where's the Beef?" This makes it memorable. Your web search should help in this area.

12. Finally, present your message using lots of images, video and showing the main ideas on a screen with a projector. See our sister publication (<http://www.christianav.com>) for more on this area of church technology. Also consult Wilson and Moore's book referenced above. Don't use PowerPoint unless you have to. Wondering why? Read Wilson and Moore.

Conclusion

The key is to let the passage speak for itself. If you follow this format, then you will be assured of having a biblical message or lesson. Over the next few months we will look at using Bible software and the Internet to study for, prepare, and present Biblical sermons and lessons more in depth. If you would like to suggest alternatives or other ideas about this process, feel free to contact me at kevin@kevinpurcell.org. I'd love to share your tips and tricks for using your computer in digital bible study and sermon prep.



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