

The Purpose of Outlining

Outlining isn't as easy as it sounds. That's not only because of the different translations, but because everyone "hears" what has been written a little differently, or with a different emphasis. That's why no two outlines will be the same. The upside of this is that we're free to investigate and creatively describe what God has said. We're not locked into a box where we're trying to uncover the only "correct" outline.

Even so, using the rules of interpretation, we know that the message is supposed to be the same, no matter who reads the passage. That's because the message was intended for its original audience. We're only listening in on it. The truth of Scripture is external to us, and it is objective in nature. Its truth is not established by each person who reads it, nor is it subjective in nature. That's a bit vague. Let's try this: the mind does not *determine* the content of the bible; it *discovers* the content of the bible. The bible doesn't mean whatever we think it means; it means only what its author intended it to mean. Its truth and its message are fixed.

This suggests that we must be cautious as we read, almost scientific in our approach. We must be unbiased so that we avoid putting words into God's mouth. We must be Spirit-dependent as we read. This is a greatly misunderstood aspect of the Christian life. Spirit-driven or Spirit-led does not mean that I am privy to something from God that another believer is not privy to as well. God never says something different to me than what he says to the church as a whole ("To the church..." 1Cor. 1:2; 7:17; 11:16; 2Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:2; 1Thess. 1:1; 2Thess. 1:1; Phil. 1:2; 3Jn. 1:9; - and particularly Rev. 2:7, 11, 23, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). He is absolutely consistent in his message. That's why we seek the counsel of others, and agreement as to what God has said.

When we read the bible, we are looking for God's objective message "to the church." We are not trying to turn what has been written to the church, at a particular moment in history, into a private, subjective message meant only for us. If we do, we are in fact creating a "private" bible. We don't want to do that. God's word is a holy thing that is not to be toyed with, or twisted for personal gain.

That's why we break up our reading of Scripture into three separate areas: what it *says*, what it *means*, and what it *means to us* personally.

When we outline a book of the bible, we are only identifying what it says.

Until we do that, we cannot figure out what it meant to the original audience. And until we figure out what it meant to them, we cannot determine what it means to us personally. The outline provides us with a context for the book. We need that context before we can begin to address the meaning of any given verse in the book. It is a miniature framework that helps us derive the meaning of individual verses. Each book of the bible likewise fits into the overall outline of the bible. The context of the whole enables us to derive the meaning of its parts.

Take the sentence, "Go jump in the lake!" I can readily determine what the words say, and what they mean. Yet, that may not help me derive its meaning for me at all. I know it is an emphatic command because it ends with an exclamation point. I know what the verb "jump" means, and I know what a lake is. I might be confused by the preposition "in" because it seems to me that it ought to be "into." I am immediately suspicious of the wording. If it's actually "in", then it would mean that I'm already in the lake, and that's where I'm supposed to jump - perhaps from the lakebed so as to propel me upward, and potentially out of the water, whether partially or entirely. If it was "into" then I would be outside the lake where presumably I'm dry, and I am being commanded to jump "into" the lake where I will become wet. There is an article in front of "lake", so I know that the command refers to a specific lake, and not just any lake in the world. I become frantic and confused. Which lake? Where? Should I go to the nearest lake? Should I bring a towel and swimsuit, or just wear my street clothes?

This is all silly supposition on my part. Moreover, it is presumptuous! *I lack context.* I am taking the command personally without any warrant to do so. I am acting as if the command was meant for me, rather than for its original intended audience. I feel compelled to obey a command for which there is no apparent reason or context. I need to know who is talking, who the audience is, when this command was given, and the circumstances surrounding it. Let's say that what I have been reading is the story of a Navy seal team being trained for a combat mission during the Vietnam war. They've received classroom instruction, and now they are going to put their knowledge to the test. Their trainer yells, "Go jump in the lake!" Ahhhh. It wasn't directed at me at all. And it wasn't a derogatory remark, either. This command is only part of a story that conveys an underlying principle.

The principle, I might conclude, is that head knowledge alone won't help us learn to swim. We've got to jump in (actually "into") the lake to fully learn the tasks which have been assigned to us. Now, that's a principle I can actually apply to *myself*. I don't need to literally jump in a lake. I need to apply my head knowledge, through actual experience, in order to fully know what I have been taught. I need to practice what I have learned. I'm not fully trained until I'm actually doing what I've been trained to do. Without context, and a little knowledge of the circumstances, I might completely miss (or misapply) the intended principle of the story.

To repeat, we mustn't create a "private" bible through our study. Outlining only describes (it does not define) the context of the book we're reading. It helps us extract the proper principle from what is written. Once we have that principle firmly in our grasp, we can apply it to our walk with Christ.