

How to Enjoy Your Bible Identifying Structures in the Text

Intro: As we read the Scripture we need to use good tools of analysis to help us accurately understand the messages that we are reading. In our last lesson we looked at some basic tools of analysis that will help us identify the writer's main themes and supporting points.

Now let's drill down a bit and think about reading structures. Don't let the language scare you. We are simply thinking about how a writer intends to communicate his message--how he organizes his thoughts. Once we grasp his approach, then we are in a better position to grasp his message. Let's look at a handful of common structures.

Some common organizational structures

Here are some common organizational structures that both secular and spiritual writers may use to communicate their messages. We see these every day in print media (newspaper or magazine articles, books, etc.) or even in other forms of communication (newscast or documentary).

Chronological/Sequence:

(Time/Order) Chronological texts reveal events in a sequence from beginning to end. Words that signal chronological structures include: first, then, next, finally, and specific dates and times. The order of events may be important to get a clear understanding of the point being made.

Cause/Effect:

Informational texts often describe cause and effect relationships. The text describes events and identifies or implies causal factors. The writer may be thinking of a spiritual condition or state and why it exists.

Problem/Solution:

The text introduces and describes a problem and presents solutions. This would be a common approach as a Biblical writer addresses problems in a congregation.

Compare/Contrast:

Authors use comparisons to describe ideas to readers. Similes, metaphors, and analogies are used in compare/contrast organizational structures. These would be especially help in helping the reader get a sense of the importance of a concept or the greatness of a person, for example.

Description:

Sensory details help readers visualize information. The idea here is to give the reader details about a topic in order to lead him to understand or appreciate it more fully.

Directions:

How-To texts frame the information in a series of directions. The writer may simply list many key steps or actions that contribute to some result.

Illustrations of these structures in the Scripture

As we read these passages keep the list in mind that I just suggested and see if you can identify which structure(s) is being used.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. (Romans 1:18-23)

Looking at this paragraph overall we can see a clear cause-effect relationship.

The effect is that God's wrath is revealed against certain people (Gentiles).

The cause is that they have rejected what they know about God.

As Paul elaborates on the cause of God's wrath, he resorts to description.

He gives us a visual picture of what the Gentiles were doing:

They did not honor God or give thanks

They became foolish in their speculations & their hearts were darkened

Professing to be wise, they became fools

They exchanged the glory of God for idols

Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. He was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was in all His house. For He has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, by just so much as the builder of the house has more honor than the house. For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God. Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end. (Hebrews 3:1-6)

Notice how the Hebrew writer seeks to establish the reason for why His readers should "consider Jesus, especially His faithfulness as God's apostle and our high priest." He does this by means of comparison and contrast.

Jesus is compared and contrasted with Moses.

Both were comparable in that they were both faithful to God. But they were different in that Moses was a servant in God's house; but Jesus was a Son over God's house.

Thus, Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses.

Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, that no man should say you were baptized in my name. Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, that the cross of Christ should not be made void. (1 Corinthians 1:10-17)

Notice how Paul structures his teaching in the problem-solution format.

The problem is that there is division in Corinth over the men who taught and baptized the various disciples there. Paul gives a description of the problem--"I am of Paul, etc."

The solution is for the disciples to agree and for there to be no divisions among them.

The basis of the solution is the realization that their salvation is not accomplished by men like Paul, but rather by Jesus. Paul makes this known by asking rhetorical questions: Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for them? Were they baptized in Paul's name? To answer these questions is to know that the stress should be put on Jesus, not only the men who taught them.

Now we can broaden the solution to say that the basis of the Corinthians unity is loyalty to Jesus who saved them, not to the teachers who taught and baptized them.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, (Ephesians 1:3-7)

Note Paul's approach here is simply one of description.

He wants the Ephesians to see what God has done in His eternal purpose for the church. If we use the subject simple

predicate form of analysis it is very clear--He chose us, He predestined us; He freely bestowed His grace; and for stylistic variation, we have redemption.

He simply describes in phrase after phrase the blessings of being a Christian.

Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth, each one of you, with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity. Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need. Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:25-32)

In this case we could call this a directions paragraph--a "how to" text.

Paul is giving the Ephesians instructions on how to live out the spiritual renewal they have experienced in Jesus Christ.

For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure, and tried to destroy it; and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. But when He who had set me apart, even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; but only, they kept hearing, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy." And they were glorifying God because of me. (Galatians 1:11-24)

Note how Paul wants to communicate that the gospel he preached was not given to him by men, but rather was revealed directly by Jesus Christ. In order to convey this idea he chooses to give a chronological narration of his contacts with those who could have

taught him the gospel--the apostles. Notice all the time elements in the text: "then, when, three years later, immediately" that clue us in on Paul's structural organization.

At first he was a persecutor of the church.

Then God was pleased to reveal His Son in him.

At that time he did not go to Jerusalem but into Arabia and then returned to Damascus.

Only three years later did he go to Jerusalem for a short time and with no contact with the apostles other than James.

Then he went to Syria and Cilicia where he continued to teach.

Of course the point of the chronological narration is to clearly establish that there was no significant period of time when Paul could have gotten his gospel from others. In fact during this long period he was already teaching others the message he had received directly from the Lord.

Conclusion: How did you do? Our brief exercise tonight has focused then on a technique that can help us discern how the writer organizes his information. That enables us to do a better job of seeing the main idea he wants to get across. Use this technique in your study and you will come away with a better understanding of what the writer intended to say.