

REVERSE-ENGINEERED OUTLINING: A METHOD FOR EPISTOLARY EXEGESIS

By Timothy R. Nichols

Introduction: The Need for a *Flinching* Method

Imagine a young pastor, fresh from seminary and a few months into his first pastorate, analyzing a New Testament passage for his Sunday sermon. His diligence in Greek paid off, he enjoys exegesis. However, the meaning of one crucial prepositional phrase still eludes him. Out of ideas, he turns to several good exegetical commentaries. Only one discusses the phrase – the rest just gloss it over and move on to more *important* parts of the passage. Worse still, it does not support its position. What good are commentaries?

No exegete is a stranger to this experience. After painstaking hours of grappling with the passage, we discover that the commentator who mentions the problem just glosses over it. How can one who has not grasped the whole passage and all its parts claim to understand it at all? An honest exegete cannot dismiss a word or phrase as unimportant before knowing its exact meaning and relation to context. A good exegetical method ought to make it obvious when one bypasses the details of the text – it ought to *flinch* when the exegete glosses over the details.

What causes bypassing the details? Generally, it results from *intuitive, top-down, big-idea thinking*. The “exegete” repeatedly reads the passage, even in Greek. Then, as an intuitive leap, he sets forth the “big idea” of the passage. He views the passage through the lens of the big idea, asking what the details contribute to it. *This method makes the big idea the primary control over details in the passage*. This leads to glossing over or reinterpreting those details to make them fit. It becomes almost impossible for the text to surprise him, because he has already reinterpreted anything that might force re-evaluation. This also makes it hard to share the exegetical basis of his view with others, because his big idea was an intuitive leap. How can others analyze this person’s study to verify his conclusions?

Multiple interpretations abound even in conservative circles.¹ Is there really so much room for divergence? Scripture cannot be so vague. What accounts for this wide variety of opinions? That is, what controls the intuitive selection of the big idea? Frequently, the correct answer is: “This man is Reformed, that one is Lutheran, the other is a Methodist Arminian...” One’s theological perspective explains his unique conclusion. Any attempt to understand the text thus degenerates into a garbage-in-garbage-out situation where theological presuppositions drown the details of the text – if any accounting of details exists at all.

Now, in this situation the primary control on the meaning of the details of a passage is the “big idea,” and the primary control for selecting the “big idea” is the commentator’s theological bias. Is this process truly exegesis? Of course not, it is circular reasoning: a well-camouflaged, linguistically informed, scholarly eisegesis.

This is clearly a messy situation. Exegetes need a method of systematically analyzing grammar and semantics of a passage. The method should *force* precision. It ought to require relating every part of the passage to the other parts to which it connects grammatically or semantically. It ought to work well when the details of the text receive due weight, but falter when one forces a “big idea” upon them. Such a method mechanically rejects many bad options (the more, the better). This transforms a formerly intuitive process into a more objective method. Properly understood, this method lets the details of the text speak for themselves and exposes the flow of the argument, while preventing reliance on theological conclusions as a hermeneutical crutch.

Such a method employs reverse-engineering. One must disassemble the passage to discover how it works before stating a big idea. Otherwise, he may force the wrong interpretation.

¹ See Glenn H. Graham, *Exegetical Summary of Ephesians* (Dallas, TX: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1997).

The Theoretical Foundation of the Method

Before explaining how the reverse-engineered method works, we must ask why it works. The theoretical foundations of any interpretive method are critical to the whole process. Reverse-engineered outlining is the direct product of some of the most foundational beliefs of evangelical hermeneutics.

The Textual Foundations of Theology

In theory, formulating systematic theology is the final step in the study of Scripture. Systematic theology relies upon an aggregation of various texts, so naturally a credible systematic requires understanding the theological content of the included passages. Therefore, a theologian first must exegete the pertinent passages to reach that understanding. This is obvious in theory, but in practice, big-idea thinking tends to use theology as a control on the meaning of the text, because who leaps intuitively to a “big idea” that conflicts with his theology?

Hermeneutical Controls

Clearly, a text cannot mean anything the interpreter wishes.² Controls on the interpretive process are necessary to prevent manufacturing the meaning. Those controls legitimately function to discover the meaning the author expressed in the text, not to insert meaning into it. Controls must obstruct wrong conclusions by showing the true meaning of the text. If they are good, then exposition surfaces the meaning the author intended, not the meaning the interpreter wants to insert into the text.

² Although that notion has recently become more popular within Christian circles, it remains problematic to the point of impossibility. See Elliot E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1990); E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1976); and idem, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1967); and Umberto Eco, *et al.*, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990); and idem, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), for discussion.

Thus, systematic theology is not a legitimate control on textual meaning. Theology comes from the text, not the reverse. What then is the control? Naturally, a grammatico-historical hermeneutic is a large part of our hermeneutical control. But interpreters who share that hermeneutic often disagree – radically so – about the meaning of a given text. What other control exists? Only the text itself remains. This is the theoretical foundation undergirding this method: The text controls its own meaning.

The Origin of the Text

In order to show how a text can present controls on its own meaning, it is helpful to consider the origin of any text. From the author's perspective, the outline of the work unfolds from the top down. For example, the author of a persuasive essay seeks to persuade the audience of his big idea. Thus, he may introduce his point, providing the necessary background to form a judgment, then lay out his arguments, explaining and exemplifying as necessary, and lastly he might summarize his position and its major supports. However, writing to persuade extends beyond forms of literature generally considered argumentative: even narrative literature generally presents a case to the audience.³ *The author begins with the big idea and works from the top down to create the text itself with all its details.* Thus, the details express the author's communicative intent. Since he wants to prevent misunderstanding, he deliberately constructs his text to lead a discerning reader to the appropriate conclusion. This applies to any text, inspired or not. The single remaining issue is whether the author successfully constructs such a text. In the case of Scripture,

³ David B. Howell, *Matthew's Inclusive Story* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990), 250–51, "Characters are judged according to their response to Jesus and the story is plotted so that they are challenged either to accept or to reject Jesus and his interpretation of God's will...the invitation and demands of discipleship are extended beyond the characters in the story to the implied reader." Cf. John 20:30–31. Lawyer, Gerry Spence, *How to Argue and Win Every Time* (New York: Saint Martin's, 1995), 1, correctly claims that argument is universal in communication: "The art of arguing is the art of living. We argue because we must, because life demands it...."

the Holy Spirit's role in the process guaranteed the authors' success.

Although authors proceed from top-to-bottom, readers must proceed from bottom-to-top. Unless the author explicitly identifies the main point of the work (as in John's gospel⁴), the reader reverse-engineers the idea from the details of the work itself and from their arrangement. Even when given the main point,⁵ the reader still is left to himself to discern from the text the intermediate structural relationships in the text that connect its details to each other and to the main point. It is this process that reverse-engineered outlining makes explicit. An average American reading the *Wall Street Journal* perceives these relationships intuitively, and usually correctly. However, that same person reading a Greek New Testament is not a parallel case. While intuition has a high probability of success for those possessing sufficient information,⁶ a modern interpreter, separated from the original writer and readers of the book by culture, language, and thousands of years, lacks sufficient intuitive information.⁷ However, all is not lost. Although the intuitive processes in communication are unconscious, any linguist can attest that the cues on which intuition depends are detectable, and can be analyzed consciously.

⁴ See John 20:30–31

⁵ The main point of John's gospel is explicit, but appears at the end of the book. If John is successful, the reader will already have believed (before reaching the purpose statement). In context, the purpose statement only gives John's rationale for his selection of material. It is not a thesis statement *per se* in the modern sense.

⁶ Intuition can be highly trustworthy, but it must be trained with correct input. Gavin DeBecker, *The Gift of Fear* (New York: Dell, 1997), shows this in the personal safety context, but it applies equally in the context of communication.

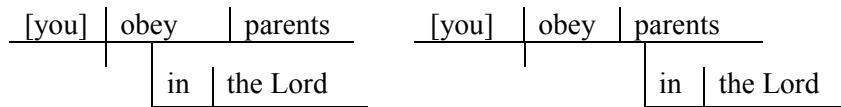
⁷ For example, how many modern readers would readily recognize the salient features of the "family letter" subgenre in Philippians? And yet any educated Greek would have recognized it. See Loveday Alexander, "Hellenistic Letter-Forms and the Structure of Philippians," in *New Testament Studies in Honor of David Hill* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 87–101.

Perceiving Details: Diagrams and Bottom-Level Outlining

If the exegete does not attend to the details, they cannot speak for themselves. In some ways this is as simple as the old dictum that all good Bible study depends on careful observation of the text. The diagram and the bottom-level outline are the tools for ensuring that nothing falls through the cracks.

Diagramming

People (usually, those lacking Greek) often question the usefulness of complicated diagrams. They are difficult and time-consuming to create, and too detail-rich to provide a meaningful overview of the passage.⁸ Yes, they are difficult and time-consuming, although practice makes any learned skill easier. Though a diagram may be too detail-rich to overview the passage, that is not its principal purpose. Instead, it is to force the exegete to deal with all the details. Consider Ephesians 6:1a in the diagrams below:



Grammatically, the prepositional phrase *en kuriō* (“in the Lord”) could modify either the direct object *parents* or the main verb *obey*. *Obeying one’s in the Lord parents* differs from *obeying in the Lord one’s parents*.⁹

⁸ See Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 29, for an example. He advocates a form of diagramming that tracks the main flow of thought, preferring to leave the grammatical details until later in the process. This is exactly the big-idea approach that an exegete must avoid, if he is really to let the details speak for themselves.

⁹ In the former case, the verse would teach obedience to Christian parents, leaving open whether a believing child with unsaved parents must obey them. In the latter, “in the Lord” would have an adverbial sense, describing the manner of or reason for obedience.

This kind of diagramming forces exegetes to confront such difficulties with the details early. When two (or more) grammatically legitimate options exist, the solution may not appear during the diagramming and early outlining stages. But raising the issue causes it to remain a consideration until resolution.

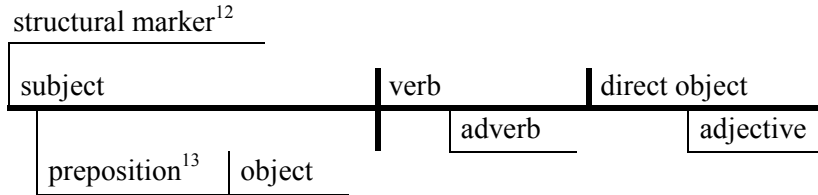
Conventions

Before discussing diagramming conventions, we must define the terms *subject* and *complement*. This article uses these terms both in a semantic sense, and in their ordinary grammatical sense.¹⁰ The *semantic subject* of a given block of text is its main idea, the complete answer to the question, “What is this text talking about?” The *semantic complement* is any subordinate clause or phrase that says something about the subject.

The principal convention is that the baseline of the diagram (the bold line in the sample on the next page) holds the subject clause, containing the main verb, its grammatical subject, and the direct object or predicate nominative. The rest of the sentence, including all complements, connects to one of these three main parts. With which one it connects can change the meaning greatly, as in the example of Ephesians 6:1a discussed above. The following sample diagram covers the basic conventions.¹¹ When a necessary feature of the sentence (e.g., the subject) is implied but not stated, either the brackets enclose the implied word as Ephesians 6:1a (above) or the diagram uses an *x* in place of the missing word.

¹⁰ Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics*, 83–85, discusses the semantic sense of subject and complement.

¹¹ Another convention is important: verbs that are forms of *be* take predicate nominatives or predicate adjectives, not direct objects. The line between the verb and the predicate adjective is slanted. (See verses 1 and 5 for examples.)



The Diagrams

The first series of diagrams is Ephesians 2:1–7, a single convoluted sentence. The grammatical subject of the sentence, *theos* (“God”), from v. 4, and the main verbs from vv. 5–6 appear on the bold lines at the upper left corner. Their principal complements also appear on bold lines on the right side of the page and in the lower left corner. The diagram includes verse numbers. The other notable feature, for the moment, is that *chariti este sesōsmenoi* (“by grace you have been saved”) from verse 5 (found in the dotted-line box in the upper left quarter of the page) is grammatically independent, that is, it has no grammatical relation to the rest of the sentence. The significance of that point is considerable, and the outline will discuss it further.

The second series of diagrams contains a full diagram of vv. 8–10, as well as an abbreviated diagram of vv. 1–7 to show the verses in their proper semantic relationship. The argument for the antecedent of *touto* (“this”) in v. 8 will also receive attention under the outline. The English diagrams in this article are translations of the Greek, rather than diagrams of an English Bible.

Outlining at the Bottom-Level

Outlining at the bottom level is the least interpretive step in the outlining process. The goal at this point is to state explicitly the meaning and inter-relationship of the clauses and major phrases that make up the passage.

¹² A structural marker diagrammed in this position, generally a conjunction of some sort, shows the relationship between blocks of text.

¹³ Note: These features can also appear at other points on the diagram. E.g., prepositional phrases may also modify verbs or direct objects.

The concepts of *semantic* subject and complement are key to understanding this outlining method. As mentioned above, the semantic subject is the complete answer to the question: “What is being talked about?” and the complement answers the question: “What is being said about the subject?” Each unit of text paraphrased in an outline statement is a subject or a complement. Subject statements use independent clauses, e.g., the statement for 5b–6. A subject statement describes what is on a baseline in a set of diagrams (i.e., grammatical subject, verb, and direct object/predicate nominative). Complement statements begin with their relation to their subject (e.g., “The reason that...” or “The means by which...”). The complement statement then states its subject (in brackets), followed by a paraphrase of the complement proper (a dependent clause).

The unit of text outlined by a single bottom-level statement varies. Generally, a preliminary outline focuses on the verbs, participles, and infinitives as the basic textual units. However, it may be necessary to devote a whole statement to a prepositional phrase or other modifying element (as in v. 8b), and it may be wise to group several verbals¹⁴ together (as in v. 5b–6).

Some Important Conventions

- Paraphrase! “Bible-speak” hides many ambiguities. Paraphrasing reveals more explicitly how the exegete interprets the clause, and prevents unwittingly interpreting the same term several ways.
- Each outline point must be a single sentence, because this forces greater explicitness.
- Complement clauses must state the relationship to the subject clause (e.g., purpose, result, time, concession, reason).
- The outline must show what grammatical structural marker indicates this particular relationship, so readers know the basis for the decision. These are in brackets before each bottom-level point.

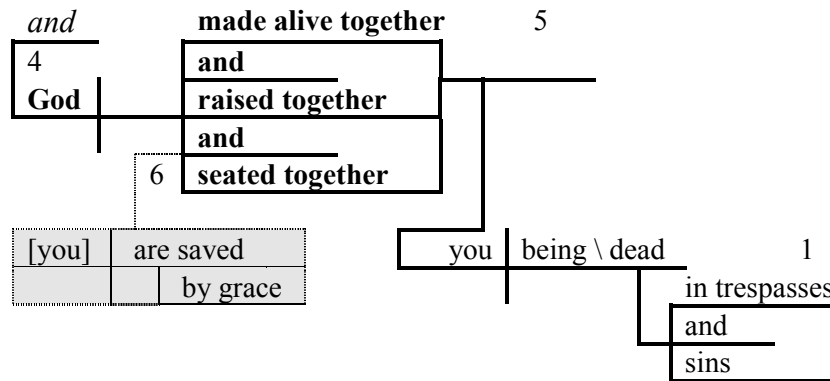
¹⁴ The term *verbal* includes: finite verbs, infinitives, and participles.

- Brackets enclose portions of the text imported from anywhere other than the clause or phrase a given outline point covers.
- The outline statement must indicate what verse(s) or fractions of verses the point covers. In this outline, the verse numbers follow each outline statement in parentheses.
- Try to avoid the word *of* in outlining. It frequently promotes ambiguity by allowing for multiple interpretations.¹⁵ Certain formulaic exceptions exist, e.g., “The result of...”

Ephesians 2:1–10

This is a bottom-level outline for Ephesians 2:1–10. This level is the least interpretive step, but still involves some decisions.

Bottom-Level Outline Statements



[ὄντας] [God saved Jews and Gentiles by grace] although the Eph Gentiles were spiritually dead in their trespasses and sins (1).

Format: The statement, “God saved Jews and Gentiles by grace,” is in brackets, because it does not actually appear until verse 5. It is not part of verse 1 proper. However, verse 1 is a complement statement. Making its subject explicit clarifies the subject-

¹⁵ For example, a statement for 2 Corinthians 5:14 might say, “The reason [Paul and Timothy are compelled to persuade people concerning the gospel is] because the love of Christ compels them.” Does love of Christ signify Christ loving Paul (or the lost) or Paul loving Christ? *Of* can be ambiguous.

complement relationship. The diagram shows that v. 1a modifies the main clause of the sentence (vv. 5b–6). “God saved Jews and Gentiles by grace” adequately summarizes that clause.¹⁶

Content: The identity of *we* and *you* in Ephesians 1–2 is a vital issue. This dichotomy initially appears in 1:11–14:

...in Him [Christ] also **we** have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that **we who first trusted in Christ** should be to the praise of His glory, in whom **you also**, after **you** heard the word of truth, the gospel of **your** salvation; in whom also, having believed, **you** were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of **our** inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.

Not only does Paul set two groups of people apart with distinguishing characteristics (“we who first trusted...” and “you also”), but verse 14 also gives parallel ideas: *you* were sealed with the Spirit, who is also the guarantee of *our* inheritance. What do *you* and *we* mean? From 1:11–14 alone, it is difficult to tell, except that the salvation of the *we* group occurred before the *you* group. Ephesians 2:11–13 identifies the *you* group:

Therefore remember that **you, once Gentiles in the flesh -- who are called uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision made in the flesh by hands** -- that at that time **you** were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world, but now in Christ Jesus **you who once were far off** have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

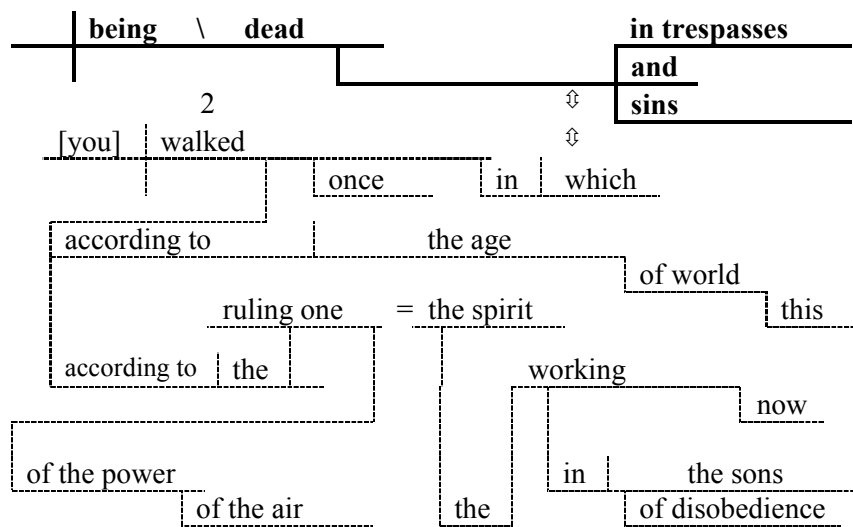
You clearly refers to Gentile believers, so the only reasonable alternative for *we* would be Jewish believers, who as a class came to Christ before the Gentiles.¹⁷ Caution: not every *we* in Ephesians is exclusive, referring to Jewish believers only. The exclusive use occurs in early portions of the book. Ephesians emphasizes the

¹⁶ Cf. pp. 52–55 of this article.

¹⁷ Recall that the Church begins in Acts 2, but not until Acts 10 are Gentiles *qua* Gentiles included (proselytes, ethnic Gentiles converted to Judaism, were considered Jews in this regard).

unification of Jews and Gentiles into one body. In unfolding his theme, Paul begins using *we* inclusively, referring to all members of the body of Christ.

The exact significance of *dead* is rather important, since Reformed circles make so much of the statement here. Discussion of this topic will appear under the upper-level points.¹⁸



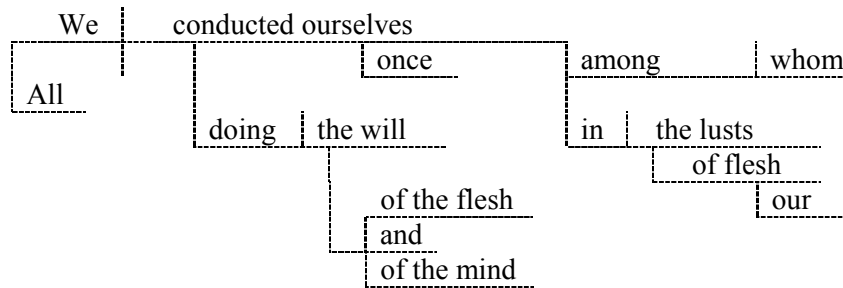
[ποτε περιπατήσατε] The manner in which Gentiles formerly lived was in sin according to this world and according to Satan, who works in the disobedient (that is, in unbelievers) (2).

Format: Although this outline statement takes the form of a complement statement,¹⁹ technically, it is a subject statement, since its only link to the rest of the sentence is a relative pronoun (which). However, *in which* logically links it to the preceding clause, and the two prepositional phrases (“according to...”) clearly express manner. Thus, the outline statement identifies that as the overarching meaning expressed here.

¹⁸ Cf. p. 44–45 of this article.

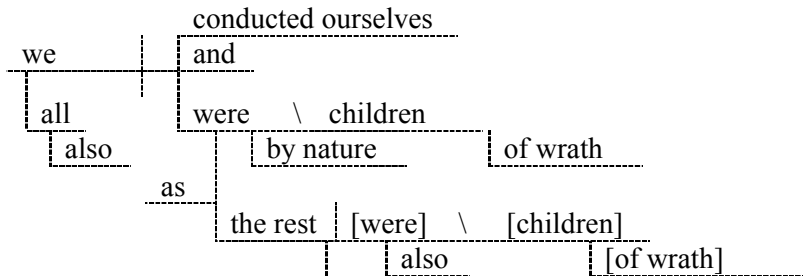
¹⁹ That is, “The manner/means/purpose/etc. of...is...”

clause (v. 2), ending in a prepositional phrase with a masculine plural noun. The reader then begins v. 3, which opens with a masculine plural relative pronoun. Relating that pronoun to the preceding noun, with which it agrees in gender and number, is the most natural reading. It seems unlikely that Paul would expect the reader to hold the relative clause in suspense in his mind until the beginning of v. 5, rather than making the obvious association with the preceding clause.²¹



[ἐν ... ποιούντες] The manner in which [the Jewish believers formerly lived] was in their fleshly passions, doing the desires of the flesh and the mind (3b).

Format: This complement statement covers both the participle (“doing”) and the prepositional phrase (“in the lusts...”). Both are complement to the semantic subject (“we conducted ourselves”), found on the baseline of the diagram.

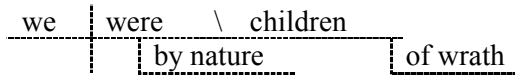


²¹ Paul could have set a relative clause two verses before its antecedent. However, why would he do so and then obscure his meaning by putting another potential antecedent so close to the pronoun?

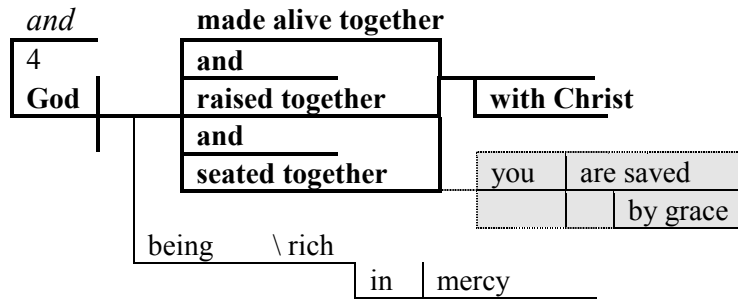
[καὶ] In addition to living among the disobedient, the Jewish believers were also (formerly) recipients of (divine) wrath, just like the rest (of the disobedient) (3c).

Format: This is a subject statement of equal level with 3a. Thus, 3c is coordinate with 3a, not subordinate to it.

Content: Paul clearly distinguishes Jewish believers from *the sons of disobedience*. The phrase does not refer to Jewish believers and v. 2 makes it unlikely that they are Gentile believers. Unbelievers is the only plausible option.

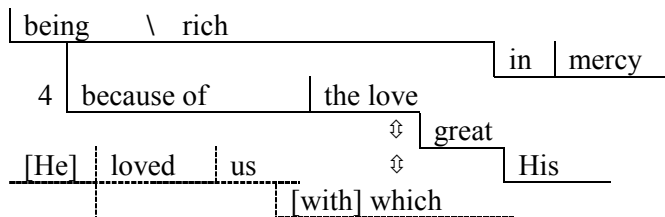


[φύσει] The reason [the Jewish believers were recipients of divine wrath] is because of their (sinful) nature (3c).



[ὅτι ... ὧν] The reason God [saved Jews and Gentiles by grace] is because He is rich in mercy (4a).

Format: Like verse 1, this clause is directly complement to the main clause, giving the reason for the actions of the main clause.



[συνεζωποίησεν ... καὶ συνήγειρεν καὶ συνεκάθισεν] **God made Jews and Gentiles alive together with Christ, raised them together with Christ, and seated them in the heavens together with Christ, that is, He saved them by grace (5b–6).**

Format: No grammatical connection whatsoever exists between the parenthetic *by grace you are saved* and the rest of 5b–6. An explanation of the relationship follows.

Content: The three *sun*-prefixed verbs²² show a common salvation for both spiritually dead Jews and spiritually dead Gentiles: they are all made alive together, raised together and seated together with Christ. These prefixes unite the two previously disparate groups (Jews and Gentiles) by showing that they share a common salvation. As mentioned above, χάριτί ἐστε σεσωσμένοι, *by grace you are saved*, does not grammatically connect to anything else in this sentence. It functions as a summary statement of the whole of vv. 1–6 (see diagram below), but addresses the situation from the readers' point of view, rather than from God's standpoint (note the subject of the main verbs *God* versus the subject of this clause *you*.)

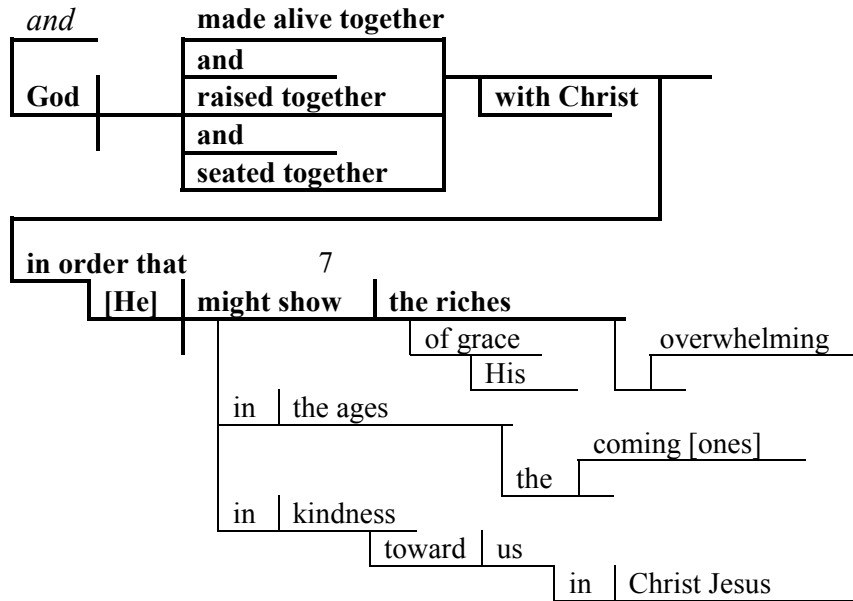
And you being dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others (vv. 1–3). . . even when we were dead in trespasses. . . (v. 5)

= by grace

²² Συν (*sun*) is a Greek preposition meaning *with* or *together*. It prefixes each of these three main verbs: Literally, believers are *together-made alive, together-raised and together-seated*.

<p>. . . but God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us (v. 4). . . made us alive together with Christ (v. 5). . . and raised <i>us</i> up together, and made <i>us</i> sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (v. 6). . .</p>	= you are saved
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This point is vital to the passage, because Paul uses the clause *by grace you are saved* again as the semantic subject of verse 8. The phrase *by grace* is crucial. The rest of the passage clarifies that God will receive great glory precisely because salvation is by grace.

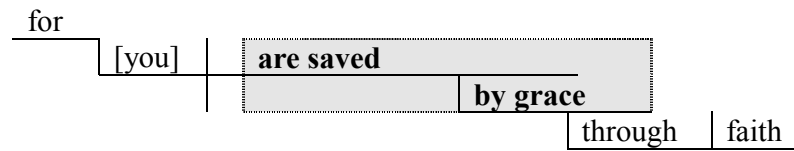


[ἵνα] The purpose for [God saving believers by grace] was in order that He might display His overwhelmingly abundant grace in the coming age by means of His kindness to believers (7).

Format: This complement has the same structure as vv. 1 and 5a.

Content: The Reformed generally emphasize that God did not save believers because they were such wonderful people, but so that He

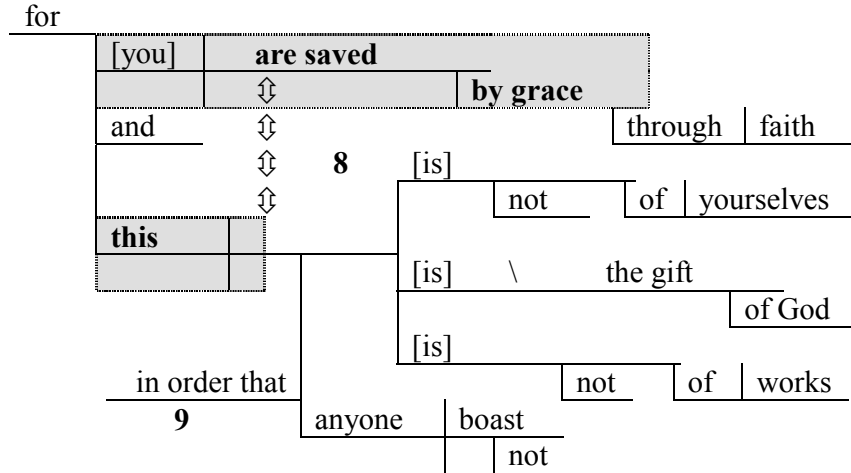
could demonstrate His grace. This passage absolutely affirms this, but it says more. It is not just believers’ being saved (as opposed to being lost) that demonstrates God’s grace. Rather, according to Paul, it is the fact that they have a by-grace salvation (as opposed to any other means) that so displays God’s grace. Verses 8–10 further corroborate this latter emphasis.



[γὰρ] The means by which believers are saved by grace is through faith (8).

Format: This begins a new sentence, but *for* connects it to the preceding sentence. This conjunction indicates that this sentence elaborates on the semantic subject of the preceding sentence. Thus, this clause is the semantic complement to the main clause of the sentence in vv. 1–7.

Content: The phrase *by grace you are saved* parenthetically summarizes the three main verbs of the preceding sentence. Paul re-introduces the semantic subject of vv. 1–7 as the continuing topic of discussion here. He tells the Ephesians that their by-grace salvation, (i.e., their being made alive, raised and seated together with Christ) happens by means of faith. This does not make faith the motive power which saves—Paul already pointed out the motive power for salvation is grace. However, if some are saved and others lost, something must separate the two. A means must exist by which a lost person becomes a beneficiary of God’s saving grace. That means, Paul says, is faith.



[καὶ τοῦτο] The result of [by-grace salvation being through faith] is that salvation is not (accomplished) by man, but rather it is a gift from God, not something obtained through work (8b–9a).

Content: Debate rages here. What is the antecedent of *touto*? What, exactly, is *this*? Wallace lists four possible answers:

The standard interpretations include: (1) “grace” as antecedent, (2) “faith” as antecedent, (3) the concept of a grace-by-faith salvation as antecedent, and (4) *καὶ τοῦτο* having an adverbial force with no antecedent (“and especially”).

The first and second options suffer from the fact that *touto* is neuter while *cariti* and *πιστew* are feminine. Some have argued that the gender shift causes no problem because (a) there are other examples in Greek literature in which a neuter demonstrative refers back to a noun of a different gender, and (b) the *touto* has been attracted to the gender of *dwrwn*, the predicate nominative. These two arguments need to be examined together.

While it is true that on rare occasions there is a gender shift between antecedent and pronoun, the pronoun is almost always caught between two nouns of different gender. One is the antecedent; the other is the predicate nom....The construction in Eph 2:8, however, is not parallel because *dwrwn* is not the

predicate nom. of *touto*, but of the implied “it” in the following clause. On a grammatical level, then, it is doubtful that either “faith” or “grace” is the antecedent of *touto*.²³

While some Reformed commentators and theologians argue for *faith* as the antecedent, it has been roundly rejected outside Reformed circles for the reasons that Wallace mentions. Using a neuter pronoun to refer to the feminine noun *faith* would be an oddity, requiring considerable defense. The same objections apply to *grace* (feminine) as the antecedent. Either constitutes special pleading. Further, within the Pauline corpus, the neuter of *houtos* never has a feminine referent.²⁴

Wallace’s fourth option, translating *kai touto* as “and especially,” hardly solves the issue. Suppose the verse did say, “For by grace you are saved through faith, *and especially* not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” The debate would continue, but instead of arguing over the antecedent of *touto*, scholars would debate the identity of *the gift of God*.²⁵ If legitimate, this rendering would change the grammatical detail at issue, permitting the conclusion that faith is the gift without resorting to a special pleading regarding gender agreement.

However, this option suffers fatal difficulties. Even accepting Wallace’s analysis of the construction, its adverbial use would be rare, requiring validation that this passage has an adverbial use. Furthermore, none of the four examples Wallace cites as evidence that *kai touto* can be an adverbial frozen form,²⁶ actually bears out his point. Each has a clear conceptual referent. In fact, every neuter

²³ Wallace, *Beyond the Basics*, 334–35.

²⁴ Ann Marshall and Timothy R Nichols, “Neuter Uses of *Houtos* in Paul,” paper submitted for 305 Advanced Greek Grammar, Chafer Theological Seminary, Fall 2000.

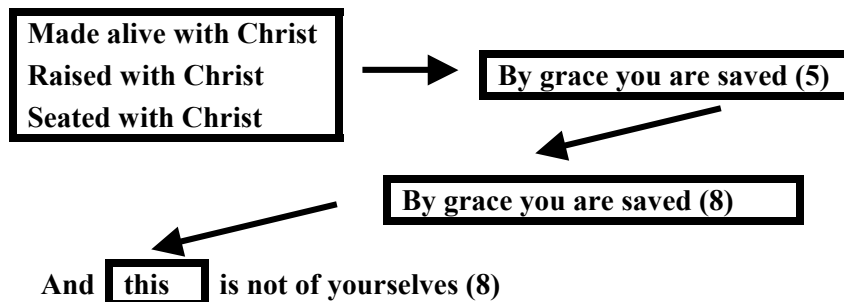
²⁵ Identifying the gift of God is the real issue in any case. Theologians who argue for faith as the antecedent of *touto* do so precisely because they want to identify faith as the gift of God.

²⁶ “Adverbial frozen form” means that while technically *this* is a pronoun, it would function adverbially (“especially”), and would have no referent.

use of *houtos* in Pauline literature has a referent (usually conceptual) in the context.²⁷ Wallace appeals to a category of usage for *touto* which Paul simply does not evidence. Ultimately, this option substitutes one special pleading for another.

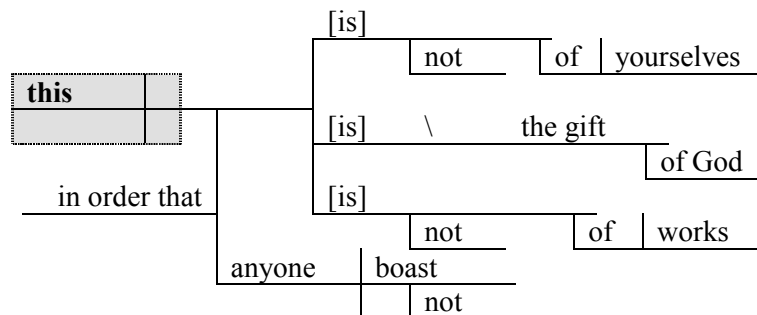
Wallace's third option, "grace-through-faith salvation," is not quite right either. Paul summarizes the subject for this paragraph in verse 5, via *by grace you are saved*.²⁸ This clause neatly summarizes verses 1–6. Paul reintroduces this clause at the beginning of verse 8 (as the semantic subject) to add the new information (complement) that being saved by grace occurs *through faith*. The continuing subject of discussion, then, is salvation by grace. Neuter forms of *houtos* virtually always have conceptual referents, so readers would look for a conceptual (multi-word) referent when Paul opens a new clause with *καὶ τοῦτο*. A clause repeated twice in the immediate context as the continuing subject of discussion would be impossible to miss (see diagram below).

What is the Gift of God?



²⁷ Marshall and Nichols, "Neuter Uses."

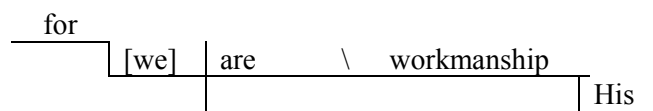
²⁸ See chart on this page.



[ὅτι μὴ] The purpose of [salvation being a gift] is so that no one can boast (9b).

Format: The *in order that* clause here is complement to the rest of 8b–9a. “Salvation is a gift” adequately summarizes 8b–9a for the purposes of this outline statement.

Content: This picks up the thread of v. 7. God saved us by grace in order to display the overwhelming riches of His grace. Our salvation is not produced by our own work, but solely His, so His grace is truly being displayed because no one else can claim credit for our salvation.

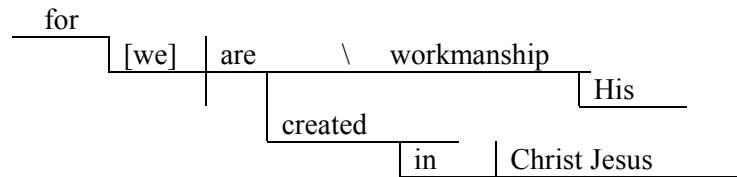


[γάρ] The reason [no one can boast about his salvation] is because believers are corporately God’s creation (10a).

Format: Like 8a, this clause links to the preceding sentence with *for*. It offers further explanation of the preceding sentence.

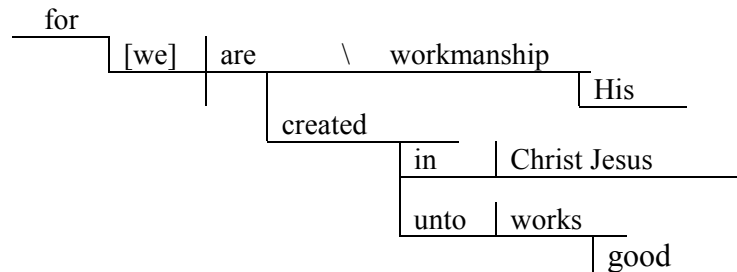
Content: Paul again hammers his point: this by-grace salvation is a work done by God. A plural verb, ἔσμεν, links a plural subject, *we*, with the singular predicate nominative (ποίημα, meaning a creation, act, or work). This introduces the corporate concept into his discussion. This passage does not say that individual believers

are works done by God, but that all believers together are His single work. He previously hinted at believers' corporate identity in 1:23, introducing the concept of the church as a body, but he has not yet amplified it. Paul develops and expands this in later chapters.



[κτισθεντες] The reason [believers are corporately God's creation] is because God made them in Christ Jesus (10b).

Format: 10b has the same structural relation to 10a as verse 7 has to its main clause (see above).



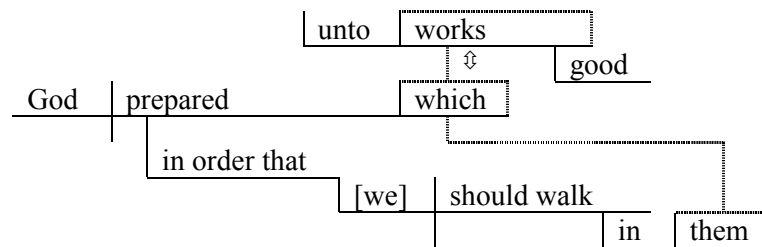
[επι] The purpose [for which God made believers into a single creation] is in order that they might do good works (10c).

Some maintain that works are unimportant, that Christianity only concerns one's relationship with God or one's understanding and intake of doctrine. Nothing could be further from the truth: while Scripture clearly teaches that good works flow out of a right relationship to God²⁹ and a right understanding of doctrine,³⁰ they

²⁹ See 1 John 2:29, Galatians 5:22–23.

³⁰ Knowledge is essential to the Christian walk. See 1 Peter 2:2, 2 Peter 2:5.

are nonetheless essential. God specifically created the church for the purpose of doing good works.



[προητοίμασεν] God prepared [the good works believers are to do] beforehand in order that believers should walk in them (10d).

Format: This case directly parallels vv. 7 and 9b.

Content: This resembles Paul's point about election and predestination in 1:4–5, so God is not improvising. He has planned our destiny, not only for what we should *be*, as in ch. 1, but also for what we should *do*. This clause also has a pregnant thought for Christian living: God did not save us so that we could rush about madly doing anything we can think of for Him. Rather, He saved us so we could do particular good works *that He planned*.

Tracking the Argument: Building Upper-Level Points

Why Build Upper-Level Points at All?

Top-down big-idea thinking is not the only error to avoid. If overlooking the trees for the forest is possible, then overlooking the forest for the trees is as well. Most have heard horror stories of a pastor who devoted four sermons to proving the kind of aorist one verse contains. Such stories are useful cautionary tales: It would be easy to plow along through the details without considering the flow of the argument. The details of the text, important as they are, are not an end in themselves. In Ephesians, they build a well-structured argument. This method draws special attention to that feature also.

Further, it is a hermeneutical truism that context is the ultimate arbiter of meaning. Building the upper-level outline points forces the exegete to come to terms with the context, first of the sentence, then of the paragraph, then of the surrounding paragraphs, and ultimately of the whole book. It is well to note that the upper-level points are more interpretive than the bottom level points. Where clause statements interpret relatively little, sentence statements interpret relationships between clauses and between the sentence and its neighboring sentences, paragraph statements interpret relationships between sentences, and between the paragraph and its neighbors, and so on.

Conventions

- The statement must still be a single sentence – but it need not be good English. In fact, it almost certainly will be a run-on that would make any self-respecting English teacher cringe.
- Condense. Watch for connections and recurring themes among the lower-level outline points to promote them to the top in order to develop the overall argument.
- Each point derives from the ones below it: the outline always moves from the bottom up. This preserves the integrity of the details and permits recurring themes and relationships between ideas to rise to the surface.

Ephesians 2:1–10

Now, the exegete begins to observe the overall structure. This examination works from the bottom up, so the first level of structure relies on observing natural linkages between bottom-level statements. In Ephesians 2:1–10, vv. 1–3 clearly go together, as do vv. 4–5a, vv. 5b–7, vv. 8–9, and v. 10. The outline statements for vv. 1–3 follow:

[ὄντας] [God saved Jews and Gentiles by grace] although Gentiles were spiritually dead in their trespasses and sins (1).

42 *CTS Journal* 7 (April–June 2001)

[ποτε περιπατήσατε] The manner in which Gentiles formerly lived was in sin according to this world and according to Satan, who works in the disobedient (that is, in unbelievers) (2).

[καὶ ἡμεῖς ... ποτε] The Jewish believers also formerly lived among the disobedient (3a).

[ἐν ... ποιοῦντες] The manner in which [the Jewish believers formerly lived] was in their fleshly passions, doing the desires of the flesh and the mind (3b).

[καὶ] In addition to living among the disobedient, the Jewish believers were also (formerly) recipients of (divine) wrath, just like the rest (of the disobedient) (3c).

[φύσει] The reason [the Jewish believers were recipients of divine wrath] is because of their (sinful) nature (3c).

These build into the following summary statement:

(1) [God saved Jews and Gentiles by grace] although the Gentiles were spiritually dead and lived in a worldly and satanic manner, and Jews also formerly lived among unbelievers in a fleshly manner, and the Jews were under God's wrath because of their sinful nature, just like the Gentiles were (1–3).

Note that vv. 1–3 are not a complete sentence. This portion of the sentence is semantically complement to the subject clause, which appears in brackets, since it is external to verses 1–3. As a summary, the statement necessarily omits certain details, but seeks to condense without losing essentials.³¹

These outline statements paraphrase the next portion, vv. 4–5a:

[δὲ ... ὧν] The reason God [saved Jews and Gentiles by grace] is because He is rich in mercy (4a).

[διὰ] The reason [God is rich in mercy] is because He loved the Jews (4b).

[καὶ ὄντας ἡμᾶς] [God saved the Jewish believers] although they were spiritually dead in sins (5a).

³¹ An outline is always a work in progress. This article represents this author's fourth major revision of this outline in one year.

These three statements summarize into the following:

(2) [God saved Jews and Gentiles by grace] although the Jews were spiritually dead, because His great love causes Him to be merciful (4–5a).

These two statements cover the end of the sentence, vv. 5b–7.

[συνεζωποποίησεν ... καὶ συνήγειρεν καὶ συνεκάθισεν] God made Jews and Gentiles alive together with Christ, raised them together with Christ, and seated them in the heavens together with Christ, that is, He saved them by grace (5b–6).

[ἵνα] The purpose for [God saving believers by grace] was in order that He might display His overwhelmingly abundant grace in the coming age by means of His kindness to believers (7).

The summary statement for vv. 5b–7 follows:

(3) God made both Jewish and Gentile believers alive together with Christ, and raised them together with Christ, and seated them together with Christ, that is, He saved them by grace, because His great love causes Him to be merciful, in order that He might display His grace (5b–7).

Note that upper-level statements do not necessarily preserve the order of the text, because they paraphrase. These three statements will in turn come together into a single statement covering the whole sentence. Sentence-level statements are crucial, because they provide a basic level of structure for the whole passage. Novices generally trust the punctuation in the Greek text. Later, students begin to question it, because although it is usually reliable, some notable mispunctuations exist.³² The full-sentence statement for vv. 1–7 follows:

³² Occasionally the traditional sentence breaks are seriously misplaced. See John Niemelä, “For You Have Kept My Word: The Grammar of Revelation 3:10,” *CTS Journal* 6 (January–March 2000): 14–38; and the summary in *ibid.*, “For You Have Kept My Word: The Theology of Revelation 3:10,” *CTS Journal* 6 (October–December 2000): 52–54.

a. God made both Jewish and Gentile believers alive together with Christ, and raised them together with Christ, and seated them together with Christ, that is, He saved them by grace, even though both Jews and Gentiles were dead in their sins and under His wrath, in order that He might display His grace (1–7).

This statement emphasizes the material found on the bold lines of the diagram. This is the main flow of thought for the sentence. The bottom-level statements of vv. 8–9 follow:

[γὰρ χάριτι] The means by which believers are saved by grace is through faith (8).

[καὶ τοῦτο] The result of [by-grace salvation being through faith] is that salvation is not (accomplished) by man, but rather it is a gift from God, not something obtained through work (8b–9a)

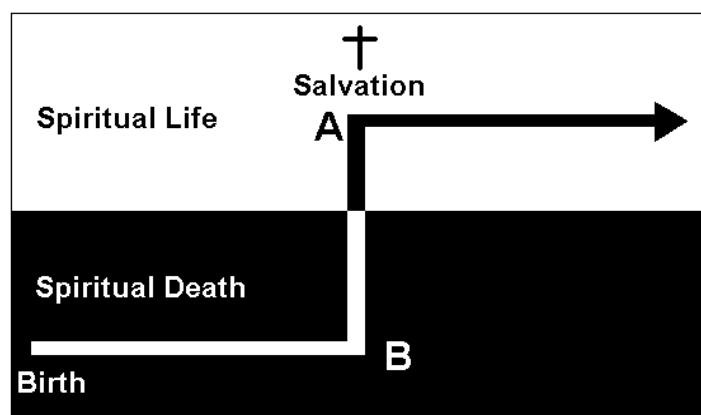
[ἵνα μὴ] The purpose of [salvation being a gift] is so that no one can boast (9b).

These three statements yield this sentence statement:

b. The means by which believers are saved by grace is through faith, and as a result salvation is not accomplished by man but by God, in order that no one be able to boast about His salvation (8–9).

Point b (in combination with Point a above) decisively refutes the Reformed claim that regeneration precedes faith. The Reformed model contends that being dead in sin renders one utterly unable to respond to God in any fashion, including faith in the gospel. Thus, an unsaved man is first regenerated, or in Paul's terms, made alive, and he lives the remainder of his existence in the realm of spiritual life (see diagram below). At that point, for the first time in his life he becomes aware of true spiritual reality: he fully understands the gospel of Jesus Christ and inevitably believes it (point A on the diagram). He is then justified and his Christian life begins. The opposing position insists that an unbeliever can and must have faith while still spiritually dead

(point B on the diagram), and on the basis of that faith he is saved.³³



Which view is correct? Recall that *by grace you are saved* sums up being made alive together, raised together, and seated together with Christ. So far, no difficulty exists for either position. But recall also that Paul goes on to say in v. 8 that one obtains the “by-grace salvation” of which he is speaking *through faith*. An unbeliever must have faith in order to be saved. If being made alive is part of salvation—and it must be, according to v. 5—then an unbeliever must have faith in order to be made alive. *Faith has to come first* (point B in the diagram). When this passage is taken as a whole, it is clear that Paul is teaching the Ephesian believers that they had faith *before* they were made spiritually alive. *Faith precedes regeneration*.

³³ The classic Arminian position actually agrees with the Reformed position that spiritually dead man is incapable of response to God unless God first enables him to respond. Arminians differ from the Reformed on two points: 1. Arminians hold that God enables an unbeliever to believe simply by giving him sufficient grace to believe (called *prevenient grace*), not by regenerating him, and 2. they hold that every person receives sufficient grace to believe. A third position exists: spiritually dead man is constitutionally capable of believing in the gospel. Passages like Luke 8:12 and 2 Corinthians 4:4 indicate such a capacity in unbelievers.

The bottom-level statements for v. 10 are as follows:

[γάρ] The reason [no one can boast about his salvation] is because believers are corporately God's creation (10a).

[κτισθέντες] The reason [believers are corporately God's creation] is because God made them in Christ Jesus (10b).

[ἐπι] The purpose [for which God made believers into a single creation] is in order that they might do good works (10c).

[προητοίμασεν] God prepared [the good works believers are to do] beforehand in order that believers should walk in them (10d).

A summary of these three statements follows:

c. The reason no one can boast about his salvation is because believers are corporately God's creation because He made them in Christ for the purpose of doing the good works that He prepared for them beforehand (10).

Both this and the preceding sentence statement are stated as complements. This is appropriate because the semantic subject of the paragraph is in the first sentence, vv. 1–7. These two sentences, while grammatically independent, are semantic complements to the main clause of v. 7.

The whole paragraph likewise builds together into a single outline point. This point seeks to summarize the following three sentence-level statements:

a. God made both Jewish and Gentile believers alive together with Christ, and raised them together with Christ, and seated them together with Christ, that is, He saved them by grace, even though both Jews and Gentiles were dead in their sins and under His wrath, in order that He might display His grace (1–7).

b. The means by which believers are saved by grace is through faith, and as a result salvation is not accomplished by man but by God, in order that no one be able to boast about his salvation (8–9).

c. The reason no one can boast about his salvation is because believers are corporately God's creation because He made them in Christ for the purpose of doing the good works that He prepared for them beforehand (10).

These three together become the following single statement:

God made Jews and Gentiles alive together with Christ, and raised them together with Christ, and seated them together with Christ, that is, He saved them by grace, even though they were both spiritually dead and living accordingly, and were both under His wrath, and the means by which they were saved is by grace through faith, and as a result their salvation is God's work and man cannot boast about it, because God created believers as His corporate creation in Christ for the purpose of doing the good works that He prepared for them (1–10).

As mentioned in the conventions section above, an English teacher would not approve this sentence. However, making the entire statement as a single run-on sentence forces the exegete to relate each part to the other parts. Multiple sentences can leave more room for ambiguity.

For the sake of completeness, what follows is a broad outline of the preceding context in Ephesians. It gives the reader a better sense of where this paragraph falls in the book as a whole.

- I. 1:1–2**
- II. 1:3–6:20**
 - A. 1:3–3:21**
 - 1. 1:3–1:14**
 - 2. 1:15–1:23**
 - 3. 2:1–2:10**
 - 4.**
 - B. 4:1–6:20**
- III. 6:21–24**

Conclusion: Tying it all Together

There are two extremes to avoid: First and most common is the top-down, big-idea thinking that intuitively leaps to a conclusion about the passage and then diligently eisegetes that idea into the details, ignoring those that do not fit. Second is becoming bogged down in the details to the point of obscuring the larger

issues of the epistle. These errors are not mutually exclusive: As shown in this paper, the Reformed position on Ephesians 2:1–10 commits both of them. By using their theology to determine the meaning of terms like “dead,” the Reformed commit the first error. By failing to relate the details of the text to each other *as the text relates them*, they commit the second, which results in a failure to see the definitions of “by-grace salvation” and “the gift of God” as the passage portrays them. The goal of reverse-engineered outlining is: 1) to avoid both traps by giving due weight to the details first, then 2) using a solid grasp of those details, to follow the flow of the argument through the passage, and ultimately through the book. This kind of method and the resultant understanding of the text equip believers to let the text speak for itself and be its own hermeneutical control.

—See Following Appendix for Full Outline & Diagrams—

Appendix

Full Outline and Diagrams

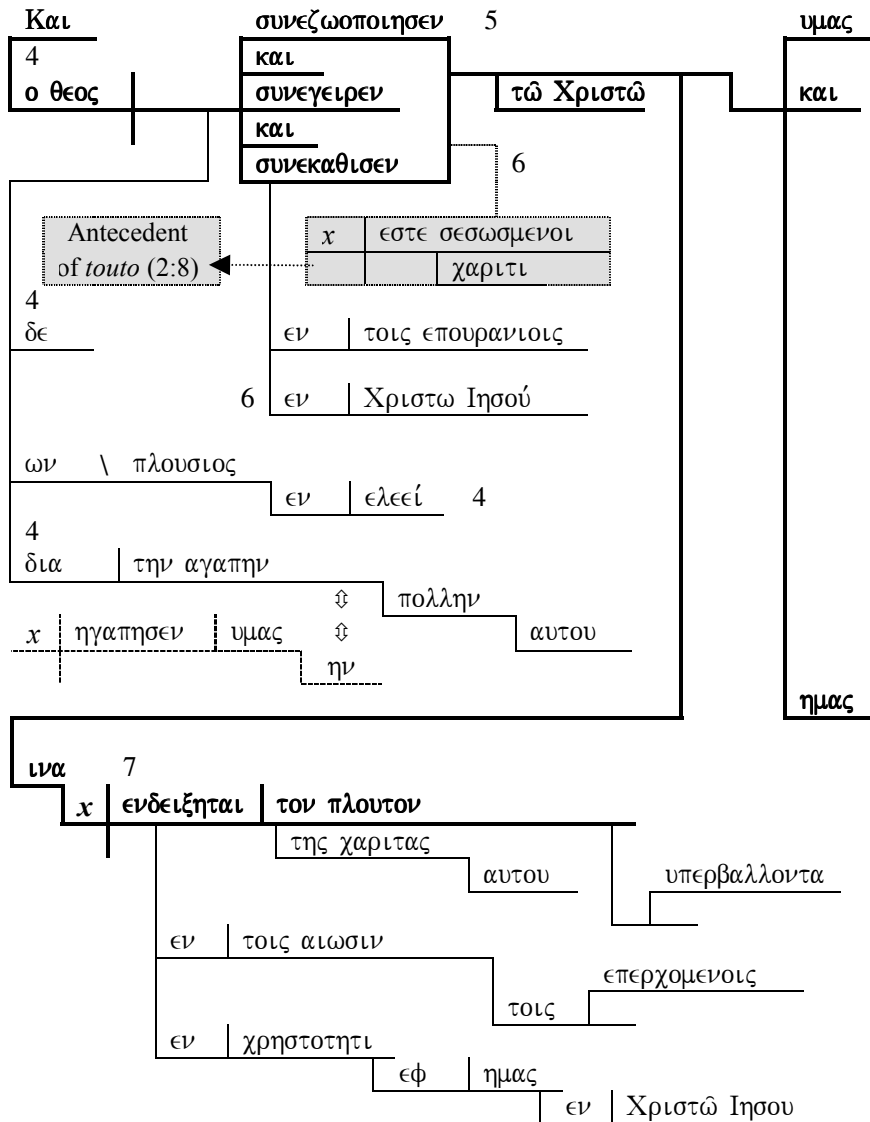
3. God made Jews and Gentiles alive together with Christ, and raised them together with Christ, and seated them together with Christ, that is, He saved them by grace, even though they were both spiritually dead and living accordingly, and were both under His wrath, and the means by which they were saved by grace is through faith, and as a result their salvation is God's work and man cannot boast about it, because God created believers as His corporate creation in Christ for the purpose of doing the good works that He prepared for them (1–10).
 - a. God made both Jewish and Gentile believers alive together with Christ, and raised them together with Christ, and seated them together with Christ, that is, He saved them by grace, even though both Jews and Gentiles were dead in their sins and under His wrath, in order that He might display His grace (1–7).
 - (1) [God saved Jews and Gentiles by grace] although the Gentiles were spiritually dead and lived in a worldly and satanic manner, and Jews also formerly lived among unbelievers in a fleshly manner, and the Jews were under God's wrath because of their sinful nature, just like the Gentiles were (1–3).
 - (a) [ἴνα] [God saved Jews and Gentiles by grace] although Gentiles were spiritually dead in their trespasses and sins (1).
 - (b) [ποτε περιεπατήσατε] The manner in which Gentiles formerly lived was in sin according to this world and according to Satan, who works in the disobedient (that is, in unbelievers) (2).
 - (c) [καὶ ἡμεῖς ... ποτε] The Jewish believers also formerly lived among the disobedient (3a).
 - (d) [ἐν ... ποιοῦντες] The manner in which [the Jewish believers formerly lived] was in their fleshly passions, doing the desires of the flesh and the mind (3b).
 - (e) [καὶ] In addition to living among the disobedient, the Jewish believers were also (formerly) recipients of (divine) wrath, just like the rest (of the disobedient) (3c).

- (f) [φύσει] The reason [the Jewish believers were recipients of divine wrath] is because of their (sinful) nature (3c).
- (2) [God saved Jews and Gentiles by grace] although the Jews were also spiritually dead, because His great love causes Him to be merciful (4–5a)
 - (a) [δὲ ... ὧν] The reason God [saved Jews and Gentiles by grace] is because He is rich in mercy (4a).
 - (b) [διὰ] The reason [God is rich in mercy] is because He loved the Jews (4b).
 - (c) [καὶ ὅντας ἡμᾶς] [God saved the Jewish believers] although they were spiritually dead in sins (5a).
- (3) God made both Jewish and Gentile believers alive together with Christ, and raised them together with Christ, and seated them together with Christ, that is, He saved them by grace, in order that He might display His grace (5b–7)
 - (a) [συνεζωποίησεν ... καὶ συνήγειρεν καὶ συνεκάθισεν] God made Jews and Gentiles alive together with Christ, raised them together with Christ, and seated them in the heavens together with Christ, that is, He saved them by grace (5b–6).
 - (b) [ἵνα] The purpose for [God saving believers by grace] was in order that He might display His overwhelmingly abundant grace in the coming age by means of His kindness to believers (7).
- b. The means by which believers are saved by grace is through faith, and as a result salvation is not accomplished by man but by God, in order that no one be able to boast about his salvation (8–9).
 - (1) [γὰρ χάριτι] The means by which believers are saved by grace is through faith (8).
 - (2) [καὶ τοῦτο] The result of [by-grace salvation being through faith] is that salvation is not (accomplished) by man, but rather it is a gift from God, not something obtained through work (8b–9a).
 - (3) [ἵνα μὴ] The purpose of [salvation being a gift] is so that no one can boast (9b).
- c. The reason no one can boast about his salvation is because believers are corporately God's creation because He made them

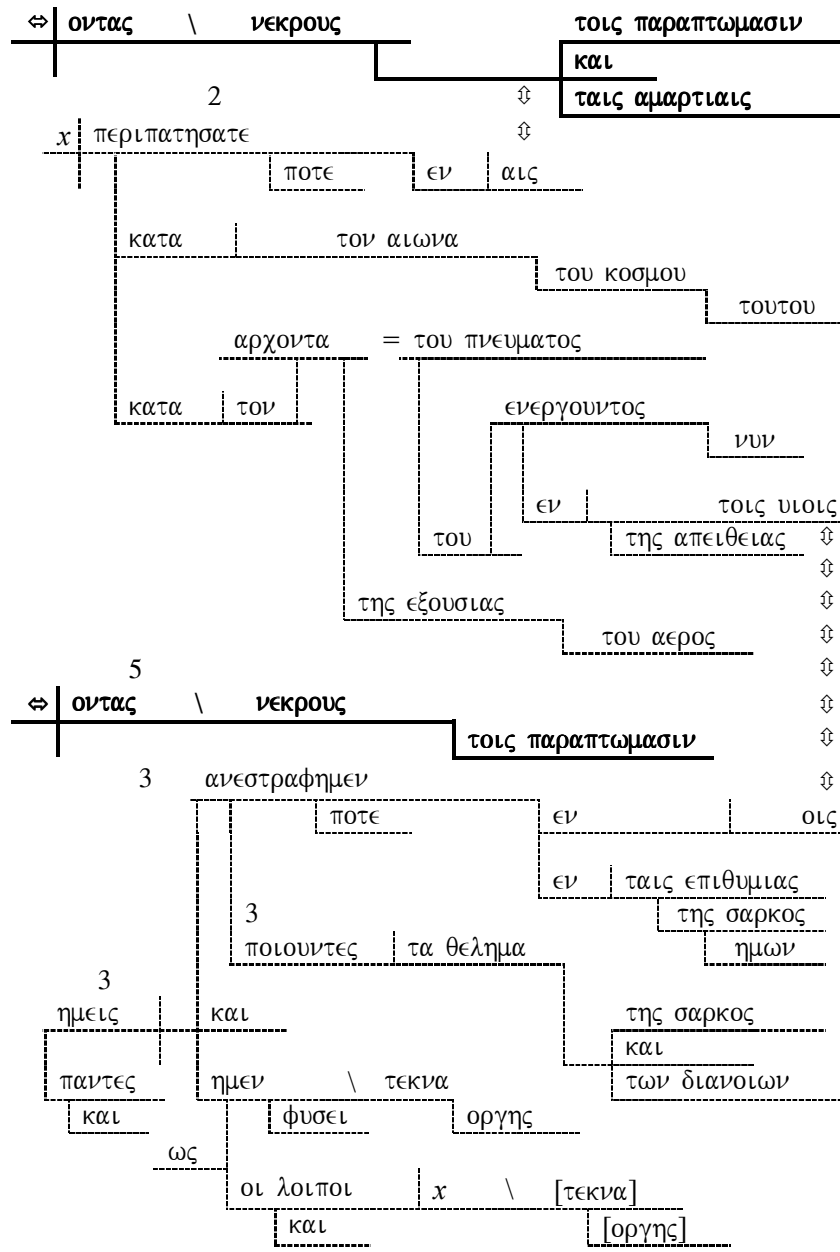
in Christ for the purpose of doing the good works that He prepared for them beforehand (10).

- (1) [γάρ] The reason [no one can boast about his salvation] is because believers are corporately God's creation (10a).
- (2) [κτισθεντες] The reason [believers are corporately God's creation] is because God made them in Christ Jesus.
- (3) [ἐπι] The purpose [for which God made believers into a single creation] is in order that they might do good works (10c).
- (4) [προητοίμασεν] God prepared [the good works believers are to do] beforehand in order that believers should walk in them (10d).

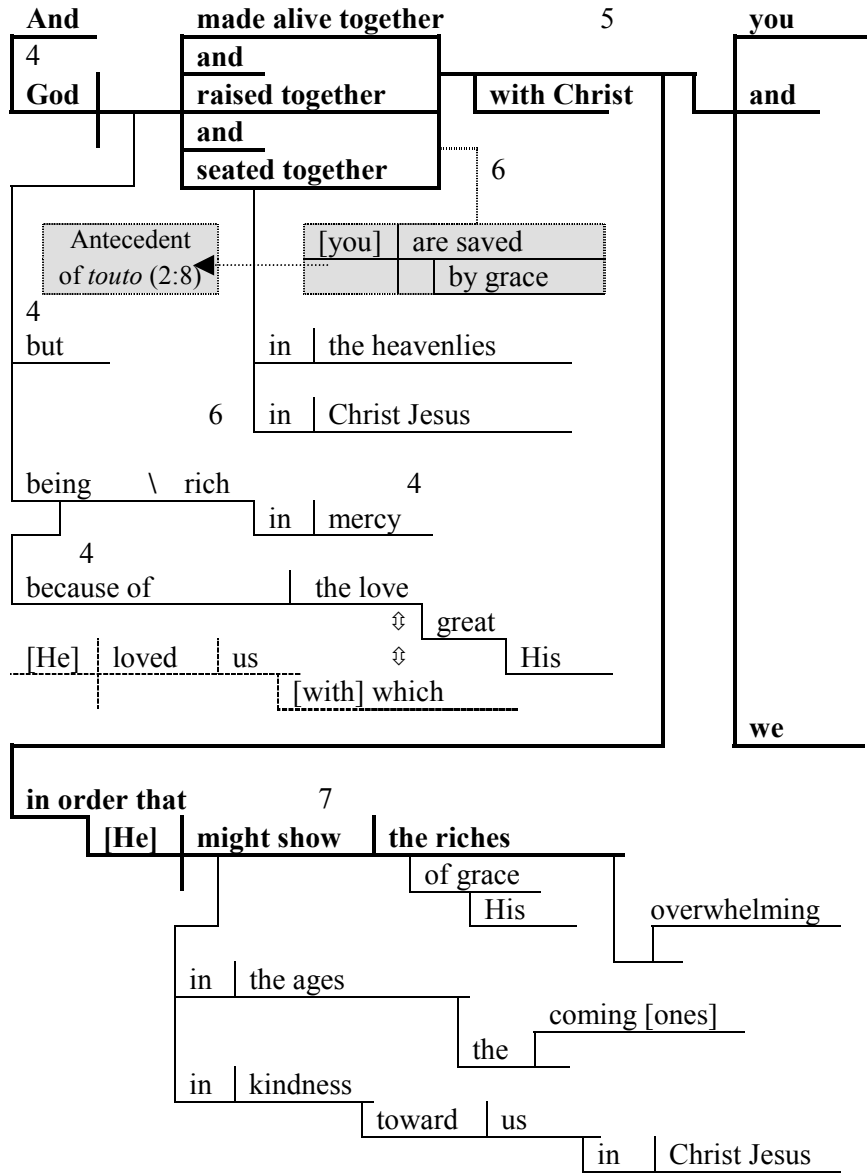
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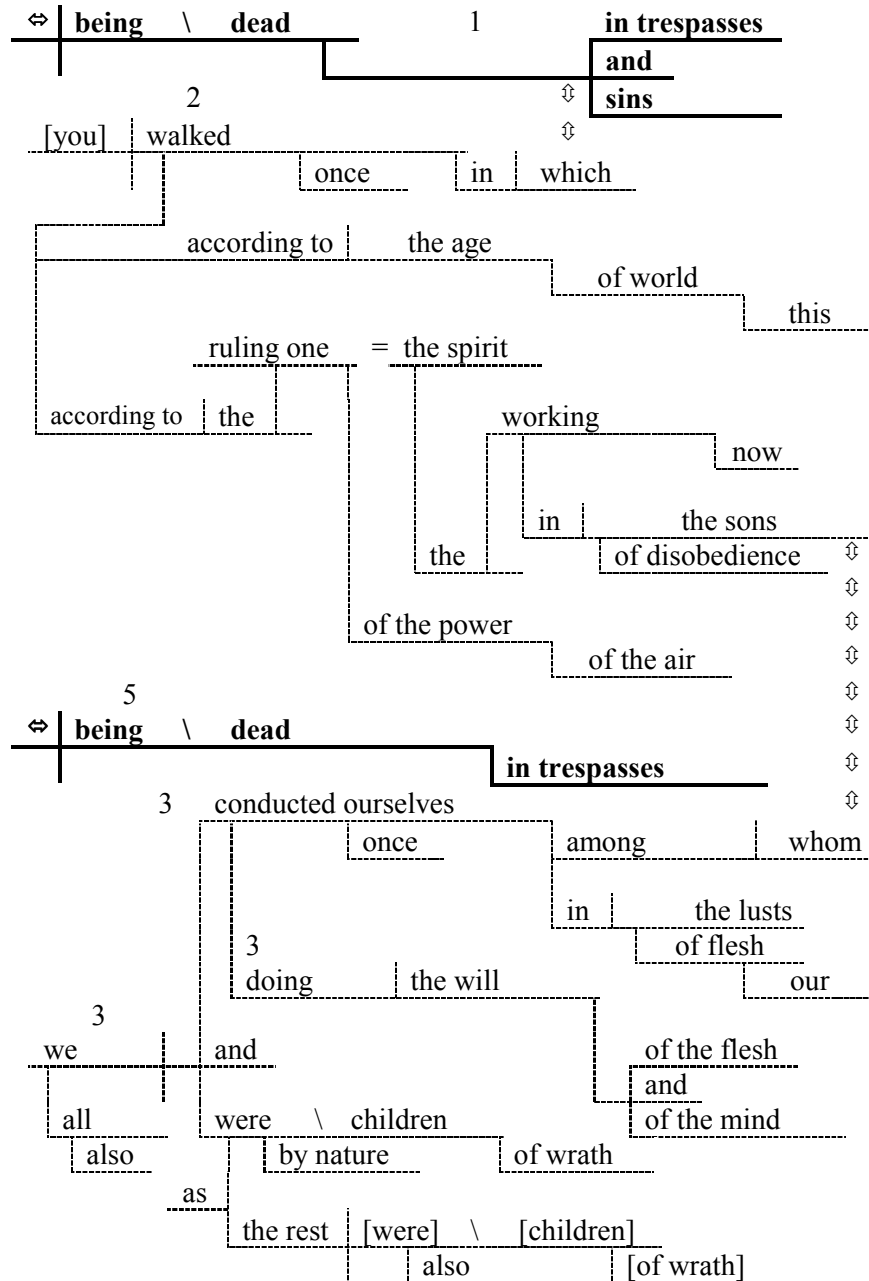
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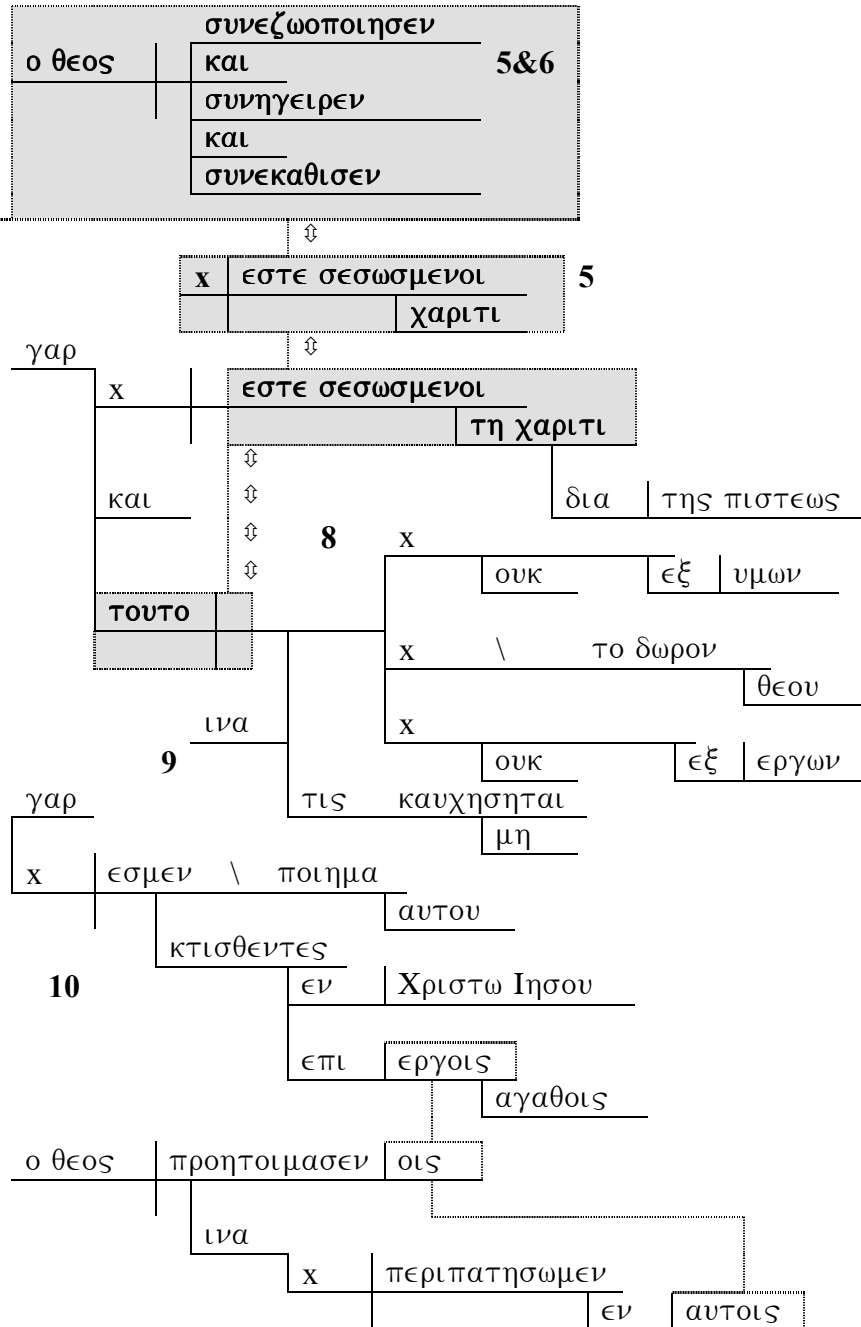
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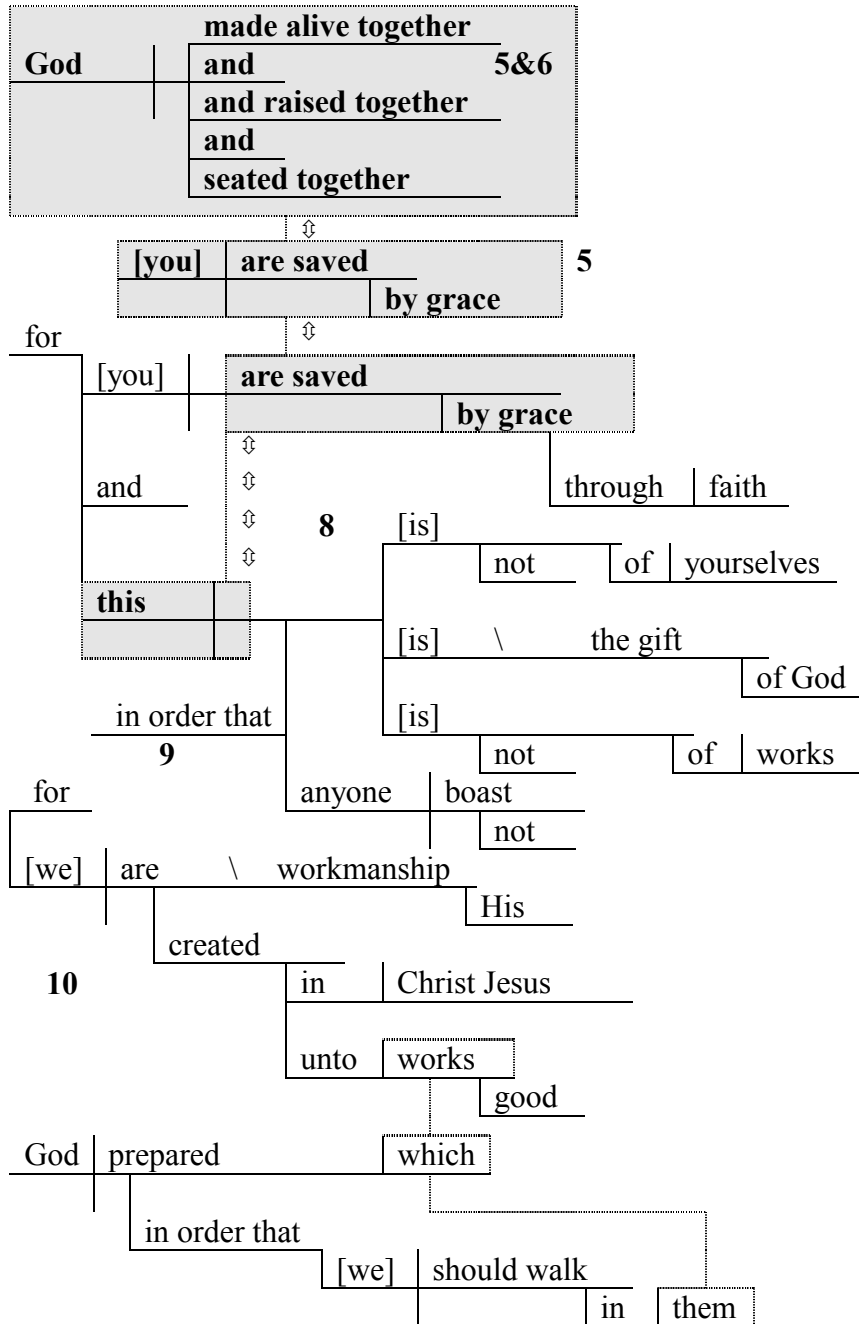
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Ephesians 2:8–10



Ephesians 2:8-10



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Both of these gentlemen have given generously of their time and skills to teach me, and this paper would hardly be possible without them. Any errors are my own.

—End—

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