Why Bible Typography Matters

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I’d like to ask you to do something you’ll never be asked to do in this church again: turn in your Bibles with me please to whatever page you want.

Now look at your Bible, but don’t read it. I want to do a little Bible Typography survey.

* Raise either hand if each page in your Bible has two columns of text, → like this.
* Raise your hand if you have just one column of text, → like this.
* Raise your hand if every verse in your printing of the Bible is set off as basically a separate paragraph, → like this. Maybe with little paragraph symbols in there → like these.
* Raise your hand if verses are collected into paragraphs, → like this.

I heard that some people thought I was going to talk about → Bible **Topography**, like → levels of elevation in Bible lands; and several people asked me if I was going to talk about → Bible **Typology**, like how Joseph prefigures Christ. No, we’re going to talk about → Bible **Typography**, the art and science of arranging type on a printed page. I was a graphic design major in what historians call the 1990s, and → I own a small business called Forward Design in which I design websites for churches. I’ve always cared a great deal about the Bible, and about good design and typography. I care about typefaces and kerning—which is the space between letters, and leading—which is the space between lines, and serifs—which are the little horns on some letters, and I never use a hyphen when the situation calls for an en dash. I care about margin size and line length and all the details typographers care about so you don’t have to. I’m not saying I’m good at laying out type; I’m just saying it matters to me. → If I get a wedding invitation that looks like this, I don’t go. I honestly don’t think typography should matter that much to *you*; I have a more modest goal: I just think it should matter more to you after this little lesson than it did yesterday.

→ Because I think you—I think we—aspire to be careful Bible readers. And I insist that *Bible* typography matters to your Bible reading. And it matters because it *means*. I admit that Bible typography is very much a first-world problem. There are many more important issues. But typography carries meaning you *are* receiving and processing, even without thinking about it. My aim today is to help you become a more contextually sensitive and careful reader of Scripture by revealing how Bible typography affects your reading of God’s Word.

Typographical decisions happen at several different levels, and I want to talk about three of them. The structure of my talk today is simple: I want to give two scriptural examples of each level. → Two Bible examples of how the narrowest level—punctuation—*means*; → two examples of how paragraphing *means*; → and two examples of how chapter and even book-level divisions carry meaning to Bible readers.

PUNCTUATION

“Put”

→ First: punctuation.

Dr. Dan Olinger was once an editor for *Faith for the Family* magazine, a publication that used to be put out by a local fundamentalist Protestant university over on Wade Hampton. It was Dan’s occasional and usually unenviable task to review unsolicited submissions to the magazine. He had to read these and write courteous thanks-but-no-thanks letters.

One submission, however, caught his attention. It was actually quite good. It was a short piece of historical fiction based on the story of Abraham’s servant searching out a bride for Isaac. The story was well written and interesting, and the added details were plausible and faithful not to contradict any details in the biblical text. The author had clearly paid attention to Genesis 24.

But there was one oddity Dan noticed. The author had given Abraham’s servant a name: → “Put.” “Put” was sent to Abraham’s kin. “Put” met Rebecca at the well. “Put” brought Rebecca back to her new husband Isaac.

“Put”? Dan thought for sure that the Bible hadn’t given this servant a name in Genesis 24. If anything, people usually guess that this servant was “Eliezer of Damascus” (Gen 15:2), not “Put.”

So Dan pulled out his Bible and turned to Genesis 24. This is what he read:

→ 24:1 And Abraham was old, and well stricken in age: and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things.

2 And Abraham said unto his eldest servant of his house, that ruled over all that he had, Put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh:

“Put”! There he was! Do you see what happened?

Dan howled with laughter (and I did, too, when I heard this story). What misled this writer? The lack of quotation marks and the presence of a capital-lettered word in the middle of a sentence both make the mistake a very natural one for modern readers—*especially good ones who pay attention*. This reader followed modern rules of punctuation in a book which used a different set of rules.

So let me hasten to say that the King James translators did nothing wrong here. This whole presentation is version-neutral. I’m not criticizing or praising one translation over another; I’m solely focused on typography. The KJV translators used the typographical resources available to them. It’s not just English *words* that have changed over 400 years. Punctuation and other typographical conventions have changed, too. KJV punctuation can mislead English readers who are accustomed to different conventions. And that’s every single one of us.

That was a silly example. Thankfully, no one has based a life decision or a doctrine on the name of “Put”—though Pastor Tipton once used it as an excuse to skip church and go golfing on a Sunday morning in 1965.

Isaiah 52

→ Not long ago I came across a more serious example of how Bible punctuation means. I discovered an important passage I had been misreading for years because I knew it so well in KJV punctuation that I didn’t pay attention to what was on the page of my modern translation:

As many were astonied at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men: So shall he sprinkle many nations... (Isaiah 52:14-15 KJV)

It was the dashes in the ESV (technically called em dashes is because they are the width of an uppercase M) that alerted me to my error (the poetic hanging indents helped, too):

→ As many were astonished at you—

his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,

and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—

so shall he sprinkle many nations...

(Isaiah 52:14-15 ESV)

→ The dashes told me that the sentence flow goes like this: Just as MANY people were astonished at him, so shall he sprinkle MANY nations. I always—without knowing it—got lost in all the intervening verbiage in the KJV. The “So” in “so shall he sprinkle” seemed out of place to me. The ESV’s punctuation helped me understand the conjunction and keep the thread of a precious passage I’d been misreading for 20 years.

I’m not really concerned that archaic Bible typography will create false doctrine; I’m concerned instead that it will make you and me miss something God has said—because Bible typography matters.

PARAGRAPHING

→ Punctuation is something most of us have been trained as readers to notice. But I wonder how many of us have given serious thought to what the very shape of the text on your page means? The second level of typographical meaning is paragraphing.

→ Those of you who have Bibles which make every verse a separate paragraph—what does such a layout *mean*? A new paragraph in almost all modern writing outside the Bible means something quite definite: a new paragraph means a new thought. What does turning every verse into a paragraph do to your Bible reading? It suggests almost subconsciously that every verse is a new thought. Do you know people who read their Bibles like that? Have you ever read your Bible that way?

Versification—dividing the Bible text into verse after verse—stops you and starts you again between every pair of verses. It tempts you to isolate the “verse” as the most fundamental unit of scriptural statement. Is that healthy?

Let me first offer an example sentence that is not from the Bible: a few months ago this child, my four-year-old son, prayed, “Dear God, thank you for our food. And please help us find Kansas. Amen.”

What did he mean by “please help us find Kansas”? Only context can say. → Were we, for example, → at a rest stop in Nebraska on a long cartrip to Topeka with dead batteries in our GPS? → Did we have a lost cat named “Kansas”? → Or were we reading The Wizard of Oz at bedtime? The list of possibilities could be as long as your creativity.

But the more context you know, the more certain you can be of what my son meant. And, importantly, the more context you know, the more impossible certain interpretations of his little prayer become. → The fact that we were at our kitchen table, that we have no cat, and had been reading about Dorothy and Toto makes the lost cat meaning unlikely, to say the least.

→ Paragraphing is important to written communication because it provides one more tool for writers wishing to convey *meaning*. A paragraph gives context to a sentence. It ties a sentence to other sentences and separates that sentence from yet other sentences. A paragraph division strongly implies that the sentences in the paragraph are tied to each other more than to the sentences outside the paragraph.

If you make every Bible verse is its own paragraph—and here’s where I’m going with this—you imply that every verse is, to some degree, a separate statement. You miss an opportunity to connect that sentence to other sentences.

The Just Falleth Seven Times

→ Here’s a scriptural example: “A just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again” (Prov 24:16). What does that mean? Christians often quote this verse when talking about spiritual failure, as if it’s saying that truly righteous people always get up and dust themselves off after every sin, up to seven at least. And I’ve discovered that this reading has been popular going back at least 150 years.

→ But try reading this statement in the context implied by the paragraphing in *this* edition of the NASB. [SHOW IMAGE]

→ The NASB paragraphing links this sentence not only with the other clause in verse 16 (“but the wicked stumble in times of calamity”) but with the previous verse, verse 15, which speaks of the wicked “lying in wait” against the dwelling of a righteous man. If they’re right to put these two verses together, and I’m sure they are, then verse 16 has to be talking, at least primarily, about physical falling in an ambush and not spiritual falling. If every verse in Proverbs is a separate paragraph, the way many Bible editions I’ve seen do their typesetting, I’m less likely to notice verse 16’s connection to the previous part of the sentence. But good typography helps me make sure I don’t miss the connection.

The Words of the Lord are Pure Words

→ Or what about Psalm 12:6–7? These verses are commonly used to argue that God has preserved His Word in a perfect line of manuscript copies. “The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. Thou shalt keep them, O LORD, thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever” (Psa 12:6). I believe God has preserved His words forever—He hasn’t forgotten a single one. But this passage isn’t saying anything of the sort, and good paragraphing helps me see why.

→ There’s a paragraph break between verses 6 and 7, suggesting to me that we’re beginning a new topic. I don’t have time to dig in here deeply, but the paragraph break is a tip-off from the editors that v.7 isn’t talking about God’s words at all. In fact, it’s talking about the poor—that’s who God will preserve.

A Very Short History of Bible Typography

→ The first words of Scripture were written about 3500 years ago by Moses. There was no Bible typography, because there was no type, just handwriting. And the first Bibles had no pages; they were likely written on scrolls. It wasn’t until the year 300 → that the codex—the book—passed the scroll as the most popular format for book publishing. And it wasn’t long after that the the church father Eusebius developed a system of numbered sections to help readers of the Gospels find parallel passages. These numbers didn’t divide the text. They were put in the margins. → And you can see them right here in this beautiful early Greek manuscript.

Chapter divisions weren’t invented till about the year 1200, by British cleric Stephen Langton. But that doesn’t mean everyone used these chapter divisions. → When the famous Gutenberg Bible, an edition of the Latin Vulgate, came out 250 years later, it did not include chapter numbers, even in the margins. Gutenberg didn’t include verse divisions, either, because they weren’t invented for another century. → Verses were introduced in 1551 by scholar and printer Robert Estienne, and even they didn’t catch on immediately.

Think of it this way. → If the Bible were, say, a 61-year-old man, → numbered verse divisions were introduced when that man was 53.

We live in the age of history-is-bunk. We just tend to assume, because it’s in the air, that we stand at the vanguard of a long tradition of cultural and religious progress. → But our Bible typography is *weird* compared to most of the history of the people of God. Divvying up our Bibles typographically into 31,103 separate “verses” is not necessarily *progress*.

CHAPTER AND BOOK DIVISIONS

→ Now let’s talk about chapter and book divisions. When I first picked up a paragraphed Bible at age 18 or so, one in which the verses were collected into paragraphs → like this, my conscience shouted at me. “This can’t be right!” I was so used to every verse being its own paragraph.

But this was a period when I had begun to be very interested in reading my Bible carefully. I was willing to try new things if they would help me. → I even got a parallel Bible, one with four translations in it—one of the best purchases I ever made.

A big problem in Bible reading for me, as perhaps for you, is that it’s hard to slow down and focus like Pastor Minnick urges us every January. You’ve read it all before; it’s really difficult to find things you haven’t already seen. One helpful thing I began to do was to → copy and paste an entire book of the Bible—like Romans—into Microsoft Word. Then I summoned my nerd skills to write a macro to → strip out all the verse numbers until the entire book was just one big block of text with no divisions other than spaces and punctuation marks. Then I would read through the text → adding my own paragraph divisions. This exercise provided a new lens for reading Romans, a lens that had me continually asking a very healthy question: where are the divisions in Paul’s argument? Can you see how that would help me follow and understand Paul’s thought-flow?

When I discovered about ten years ago that → a brand new Bible edition was coming out which stripped out chapter and verse numbers for me without the need for a computer macro, I got excited. I ordered one. Then I ordered a whole case of them, and I made sure other seminarians got one. I’m not sure if anyone else got as excited as I did, but a Bible typeset like a normal book just seemed, then and now, like such a fantastic idea. (I didn’t learn till years later that → the idea isn’t new; I discovered at least one similar edition going back into the 19th century.)

Now let’s get to the two examples I promised. At the chapter level and even the book level, stripping out man-made textual divisions did at least two really neat things for my Bible reading.

Passing Book Borders

→ The first example is simple: I read straight from 2 Chronicles through into Ezra and didn’t even realize it till I was a few chapters in. That was a powerful experience, it really was. It reminded me that I was reading one big story, not just discrete “books” on different topics.

Implicit Permission

→ But the second example is what I think you’ll be most interested in. I found that having a Bible without verse and chapter divisions kept me reading longer. Without chapter breaks to stop me, I just kind of kept going.

Now listen to what I’m not saying: I’m not saying that you should drop chapter and verse numbers from your life entirely. You can’t, and you shouldn’t. → We have tons of good study editions of the Bible and commentaries and other books that use the reference system. Footnotes and study notes and alternate translations in the margin are all wonderful tools for when you want to dig deep into a small portion of Scripture—like we generally do three or four times a week at Mount Calvary. We love and need our “Study Editions” of the Bible. Don’t give them up.

Instead I’m encouraging you to add a new category of Bibles to your thinking: “Reader’s Editions.” Verse numbers and superscript letters clutter up the text; you don’t have to have them all the time. Sometimes, like in church or during a Bible study, you’ll want your study edition; sometimes, like when you’re just reading your Bible, you’ll want a reader’s edition.

A few years ago I read a whole book about Bible typography. The author was the leading theologian behind that edition of the Bible I ordered a case of, an edition his team called “The Books of the Bible.” Here’s one thing he said:

→ Three people who began reading right at the start of *The Books of the Bible* [project] each reported how long it took them to finish the book of Genesis. One said four days; another, three; another, one. When we consider that reading Genesis takes three weeks if a person follows a typical read-through-the-Bible plan, we see how readily people will adopt new reading practices, and have a much more fulfilling experience with God’s word, as soon as they have resources that give them implicit permission to do so. (131)

Implicit permission. That’s exactly it: when your Bible puts a big chapter break in the middle of a section, it can become a voice saying, “You’ve reached a good stopping point!” What if we silence that voice? What if one of the best ways for you to get through the Bible this year is not to schedule a stopping place every day? What if your Bible typography gave you ***implicit permission*** to do what is totally natural: finish the story of Joseph, or the Sermon on the Mount, or the first half of Romans, rather than stopping at an awkward and arbitrary point? I got a reader’s Bible like this for my wife a few months ago, and she commented to me, “You get further [in your reading] without realizing it.”

CONCLUSION

I want to conclude with a time-delayed come-forward invitation. I invite you to come forward after church is out today, then go out those doors, down the steps, take a hard right, and buy a copy of the brand new ESV Reader’s Bible—a single-column, paragraphed ESV with no verse divisions or other marks in the text. Please don’t bow your head and close your eyes during this invitation, or you’ll trip. I hope that the most practical result of this Sunday School lesson is little bit of sanctified consumerism. I asked Pastor Vincent to order a bunch of these, and I want you to wipe out his stock. I wish there were a NASB version to recommend; the closest thing is the Cambridge Clarion, but it has verse numbers. *The Books of the Bible* project I mentioned earlier is in a translation I’m not as keen on—but if you’re in seminary you should ask me about it.

Unfortunately, to my way of thinking, the ESV Reader’s Bible left chapter divisions in. But I’ll take what I can get because the ESV is the translation I use most. Crossway really did their homework to make this a beautiful Bible. → They chose a really excellent typeface called Lexicon, done by a Dutch designer who initially drew the face out by hand. They also helped pioneer an innovative printing method in which lines of type on the back of a page match up perfectly with those on the front—so you don’t have text ghosting through between the lines. I mean, they worked hard on this. And it’s quite an experience to read the Bible without constant interruptions. It’s the typographical equivalent of toddler nap time.

I can imagine that there are people in here who are still wondering whether this topic was worth 40 minutes of their lives. You might still be saying to yourself, “Nobody thinks that just because every verse stands alone they’re disconnected to the others. I don’t need to spend money to remind myself that context is important. Isn’t it more important to *read* the Bible than to worry about the way it looks?”

Of course it is. But I have some answers to these little objections. Firstly, just try a Reader’s Bible and see for yourself. And secondly, all the cool people are doing it.

→ A few months ago, there was a project online in which a guy named Adam Lewis Greene was looking for people to invest in a Kickstarter campaign to create a new reader’s edition of the Bible called Bibliotheca. → It would have four volumes, thick paper, no verse numbers, no chapter numbers. Just pure Bible text. The guy made his own excellent typeface, very similar to Lexicon. Some of his friends made a nice promo video, and he stuck it out there on the Internet to see if he could get anybody interested.

→ Greene thought he might be able to get *maybe* 500 people to commit up to a maximum of $37,000 all together, and he could order a small custom print run. A few backers began to trickle in, and they became a stream, then a river, then a flood. By the last day of his campaign, Greene had raised $1.4 million from almost 15,000 backers.

My book budget could not stretch to meet the price, but there was no way I was going to be left out. I plunked down my $25 for one volume, the New Testament, and it should land in my mailbox soon.

Many people today are clearly interested in reader’s editions. However, I realize that at this church an appeal to the practice of the cool people might be the wrong line of appeal…

→ So let’s try a “thirdly”: Bible compositors at publishing houses can’t avoid communicating something about the biblical authors’ intentions by their use of typographical conventions. And you as a reader can’t avoid the issue, either. Your Bible edition is either going to help you read like the author intended or it’s going to impede you.

That’s what we’re after here: good interpretation, good reading, for the health of the body of Christ. Good Bible reading is one of the most important things we aspire to as a local body of believers. Lots of things are more important than Bible typography, sure, but we *should* care about the very shape of the text on our pages, because → **Bible Typography Matters**.